

RADICALISM IN AMERICA'S "INDUSTRIAL JUNGLE": METAPHORS OF THE  
PRIMITIVE AND THE INDUSTRIAL IN ACTIVIST TEXTS

Ursula McTaggart

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Doctoral Committee

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Purnima Bose, Co-Chairperson

---

Margo Crawford, Co-Chairperson

---

DeWitt Kilgore

---

Robert Terrill

June 18, 2008

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Ursula McTaggart  
Radicalism in America's "Industrial Jungle": Metaphors of the Primitive and the  
Industrial in Activist Texts

Scholars often view political texts as mere propaganda, characterized by rigid ideologies rather than the nuance of literature. This text argues the opposite through a study of post-1945 American radical movements. Far from generating simple propaganda, social movements create rhetoric and imagery that engage with complex literary tropes. Specifically, this study addresses the use of "primitive" and "industrial" metaphors in African-American literature and four twentieth-century radical movements: the Black Panther Party, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, the socialist tradition of taking industrial jobs, and the work of contemporary anarchists. Comparisons between these movements and Black Arts Movement texts, neo-slave narrative novels, and works of black speculative fiction illustrate the flaws and possibilities of each movement's combination of aesthetics and politics. "Primitive" and "industrial" tropes form the backbone of this comparison because they illustrate how activists imagine the past, present, and future as they attempt to enact these liberation narratives. Moreover, few activists employ one of these metaphors without also relying on the other. Contemporary anarchists, then, dream of a return to hunter-gatherer behavior by dumpster diving in the urban and industrial settings; similarly, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers insisted that the auto worker was the key to revolution even as it decorated its newsletters with panthers and African masks. By focusing on the creative ways that political organizations have used these tropes, this project insists that the juncture between literature and political rhetoric has the potential to accommodate pragmatic political change, complex ethical questions, and rich aesthetic representations

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## KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations
AFSCME	American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees
AFT	American Federation of Teachers
BAM	Black Arts Movement
BART/S	Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School
BPP	Black Panther Party
CAP	Congress of African Peoples
COINTELPRO	Cointerintelligence program
Comintern	Communist International (aka the Third International)
CORE	Congress of Racial Equality
CP	Communist Party
CPUSA	Communist Party-United States of America
CWA	Communications Workers of America
diy	do-it-yourself
DRUM	Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement
<i>DRUM</i>	Newsletter of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement
ELRUM	Eldon Revolutionary Union Movement
<i>ELRUM</i>	Newsletter of the Eldon Revolutionary Union Movement
GM	General Motors
GOAL	Group on Advanced Leadership
IBT	International Brotherhood of Teamsters

ICV	<i>Inner-City Voice</i> (newspaper of League of Revolutionary Black Workers)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IS	International Socialists (U.S.)
IWW	International Workers of the World
LCFO	Lowndes County Freedom Organization
LRBW	League of Revolutionary Black Workers
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NLF	National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam
NLRB	National Labor Relations Board
PL	Progressive Labor (later the Progressive Labor Party [PLP])
RCP	Revolutionary Communist Party
RNA	Republic of New Afrika
RAM	Revolutionary Action Movement
SDS	Students for a Democratic Society
sf	speculative fiction
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
SP	Socialist Party
SSAC	Soul Students Advisory Council
SWP	Socialist Workers Party (U.S.)
TTU	Telephone Traffic Union

UAW	United Auto Workers (officially United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America International Union)
USAS	United Students against Sweatshops
USWA	United Steelworkers of America
WP	Workers Party
WTO	World Trade Organization
YCL	Young Communist League (youth group of the Communist Party)
YPSL	Young People's Socialist League (youth group of the Socialist Party)
YSA	Young Socialist Alliance (youth group of the Socialist Workers Party)

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## *Introduction*

When a reporter from *Free Speech Radio News* asked a bystander for her opinion on the Iraq War at a 2005 antiwar demonstration, the woman responded that she had “never been a peace and freedom advocate” (“‘Navy Town’ Calls for an End to the War in Iraq”). The woman, identified as Jane Hobda, meant that she supported the war and disapproved of antiwar activists. In Hobda’s estimation, the antiwar movement had successfully claimed the terms “peace” and “freedom” for their own cause. As a result, “peace” and “freedom” could *only* describe the leftist or liberal world envisioned by many antiwar protesters. Hobda’s response is striking, especially because George W. Bush has attempted to frame the Iraq War as a quest for Iraqi “freedom.” For Hobda, however, Bush and fellow conservatives have been less successful than antiwar activists in appropriating the term “freedom.” As a result, Hobda can only understand “peace and freedom” as part of a leftist worldview. Whether or not others agree with Hobda’s assessment that antiwar activists have trumped conservative rhetoric about “freedom,” it is clear that they have *attempted* to claim freedom, peace, and many other terms as signifiers of radicalism. Antiwar protesters have even tried to appropriate the honks of passing cars when they hold picket signs declaring “honk for peace.” By insisting that the honk is a signal of peace, protesters neutralize the negative honks of passing drivers. If the honk is “for peace,” then the angry honk is re-signified as a gesture of support.

These examples from the contemporary antiwar movement demonstrate how political activists rely on language, imagery, and cultural signs to communicate their message, recruit new members, and become part of the general cultural consciousness. Although this observation is not new, it is more unusual to view such political language



and imagery as *literary*. Instead, scholars and the public tend to interpret political language—whether from the mouths of activists or mainstream politicians—as propaganda.<sup>1</sup> The distinction between political discourse and literature relies on perceived differences between the subtlety and complexity of their messages. Political language can resemble advertising with its carefully regulated rhetoric that is often based on simplifications or abstractions. Literature, on the other hand, engages the complexities of language, identity, and ethics, and it may or may not make a political statement in the process. In this project, I attempt to break down the barrier between literature and political language by arguing that twentieth-century American radical movements often employ language and imagery in literary ways. In particular, I argue that literature often critiques social movements on theoretical levels, questioning and making visible the implications of activists’ rhetorical choices. Although I do not deny the existence of simplistic activist propaganda or the problems of using hardened metaphors in political language, I contend that there is often more substance to political metaphors than we might think. While scholars of social movements typically focus on historical and sociological factors in political resistance, I follow T.V. Reed in claiming that literary analysis should also play an important role in social movement studies.

Reed argues that social movements can learn from literary theory and that literary theory can benefit from the pragmatism of social movements. He insists that we must study the “poetics of social movements,” including “the underlying rhetorical figures that shape them” and the “movements themselves as forms of cultural and political expression” (*Fifteen Jugglers* 16). Reed begins this project by employing literary analysis and cultural studies methods in his work on music in the civil rights movement, political

drama in the Black Panther party, poetry in feminist consciousness-raising, murals in the Chicano Movement, popular film and its relation to the American Indian Movement, rock music and the anti-apartheid movement, graphic arts in AIDS activism, and the internet in the anti-globalization movement (*The Art of Protest*). The rhetoric and imagery of these movements, he argues, have helped shape America's contemporary culture.

My project builds on Reed's work and confirms that the "poetics of social movements" is a large-scale undertaking worthy of extended academic inquiry. While Reed examines a wide range of social movements and their cultural impacts, I focus on two metaphors, the primitive and the industrial, as guiding tropes for twentieth-century American radicals. By tracing the history of these metaphors in the Black Panther Party, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, the International Socialists, the Socialist Workers Party, and contemporary anarchists, I investigate the ways that activists imagine the past, present, and future as they attempt to construct more just social systems. In my study of each movement, I am interested less in how the "primitive" and the "industrial" stand alone as diametrically opposed tropes and more in how they co-exist within organizations, texts, and visions of the future. Moreover, I argue that the complex interactions of these metaphors with one another and with an organization's ideology allow radical groups to converse with African-American literature of their time period. Because black American literature struggles with the realities of contemporary racism and the history of American slavery, it has been concerned with themes of freedom, justice, and social change. African-American writers therefore employ similar metaphors and narrative structures to their activist contemporaries. American radical texts and

African-American literature frequently comment on, revise, and critique one another through the core tropes of the primitive and the industrial.

I have chosen to focus only on organizations with revolutionary ideologies. Three of these movements are broadly socialist and all belong to the 1960s and 1970s era of the “New Left.” The final chapter turns to contemporary anarchists. I make this temporal and ideological break for several reasons. First, I am interested in how primitive and industrial tropes have evolved since the radical upsurge of the New Left, and today’s radical milieu is dominated by anarchists rather than socialists. Any discussion of twenty-first century radicalism would miss its mark if it failed to acknowledge anarchist culture. Second, I see anarchism and socialism not as warring ideologies but as divergent perspectives on the radical spectrum. Anarchists and socialists differ in their tactics and their understanding of the state, but they share a critique of capitalism and a belief in revolution rather than reform. My dissertation illustrates the metaphorical continuities between socialist and anarchist traditions in the rhetoric and imagery of these movements, reflecting their status as cultural “cousins” in American activism.

Before returning to a brief outline of each chapter, I will offer preliminary definitions of the “primitive” and the “industrial.” It is, of course, impossible to authoritatively define these terms. Given that they are such large metaphors with an enormous number of associations, my references to the “industrial” and the “primitive” are fluid, shifting according to the links and connotations that particular activist organizations invoke. The term “primitive” is especially charged because it suggests an inferior or less advanced social system and carries the weight of racist and imperialist uses. The term’s fraught histories in anthropology and social definitions of race are

exactly the reasons that the “primitive” has been so important to activists. Its controversial status means that primitive metaphors attract immediate public attention, and the invocation of the “primitive” has often permitted activists to call attention to social hierarchies. It has also, as we will see, sometimes led them into the old traps of exoticized, romanticized racism. The Black Panther Party, for instance, sometimes replicated racist stereotypes when it employed racialized imagery such as panthers, African masks, and spears, while contemporary anarchists idealize tribal people as remnants of a more egalitarian and ecologically sound “primitive” lifestyle.

The “industrial” can likewise be difficult to define because it refers alternately to factory production, the capitalist economy, or simply the generic experience of contemporary urban life. In the late twentieth century, there has been an ongoing debate over the status of industrial capitalism in Western nations. Is *deindustrialization* a real phenomenon? Has it taken the United States and other “industrialized” nations into a “post-industrial” era? These definitions and questions about the “industrial” coexist within my project. Although I will incorporate discussions of “post-industrial” life and deindustrialization where relevant for the politics and aesthetics of the movements I discuss, I do not view the “industrial” as an anachronism in Western societies. Smoky nineteenth century factories and auto plant assembly lines may evoke the strongest associations with the “industrial,” but I will also include contemporary representations of urban infrastructure and smaller-scale production in my discussions of the trope.

### **Industrial Metaphors and the Labor Rights Tradition**

Because the industrial revolution began in England before spreading to the continent and the United States, and because Marx based his definition of industrial

capitalism primarily on his observations of Western Europe, American understandings of the “industrial” grew out of trans-Atlantic relationships. In England, America’s most direct cultural and economic influence, the growth of factory production sparked dissent even before the 1848 publication of Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, Luddites resisted the introduction of industrial machinery, and some of Britain’s first railroad openings attracted protesters who were angry about the introduction of new machinery (Nye 54; *Opening of the Liverpool and Manchester Railroad*). Conservative and wealthy Britons also worried that industry could become a corrupting force. British writer Harriet Martineau, for instance, argued fervently against union movements but nonetheless used her 1832 story “A Manchester Strike” to depict factories as inhumane institutions plagued by the problems of brutal child labor, severe underpayment, and unhealthy working conditions.

David Nye and John Kasson note that attitudes about industrial development were far more negative in Britain than in the United States. Although Kasson concedes that Americans were unsure about industrial development in the late eighteenth century because of their desire to establish a democratic republic based on agricultural production, these sentiments changed dramatically by the early nineteenth century. During this period, Americans largely embraced industrial development as a way to prove their worth in comparison to England (Kasson 3). Nye claims that this public enthusiasm led Americans to perceive markers of industrial development like factories, railroads, bridges, and dams through the lens of the “technological sublime.” Just as natural phenomena like the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls could elicit feelings of the “natural sublime,” industry generated a sense of awe in onlookers impressed by its scale,

aesthetics, and productive capacity. Industry's enormous and complex machines symbolized human dominance over the environment, and this dominance was expressed in several ways. Sometimes it appeared in the form of precise and ordered productivity. The identical white dresses of female workers lining the neat rows of machines in Lowell, Massachusetts's nineteenth-century textile mills, for instance, made visitors proud of American technological rationality and economic success (Nye 112-16). At other times, machines created an awe-inspiring fear in observers, exemplified by Walt Whitman's reference to the locomotive as a "fierce-throated beauty" taking over the landscape. This mix of wonder and fear would accompany descriptions of industry long into the twentieth century (Nye 56; Whitman 358). In a 1923 biography of Henry Ford, William Stidger described the River Rouge auto plant with similar metaphors: "white waters of flame and fire, awe-inspiring, soul-subduing romance! Romance! Romance of Power!" (Nye 131; Stidger 115).

Expressions of euphoria about industry did not disappear, but by the beginning of the twentieth century the United States had also collected its fair share of industrial naysayers. Beginning in the 1870s, economic and social worries began to tarnish industry's promise. The Panic of 1873 sparked economic initial fears, and major railroad strikes in 1877 and 1885 suggested that American laborers were not as enamored with the industrial system as the public and the press had been. In the 1890s, a major depression confirmed and deepened anti-industrial sentiments in a larger segment of the American public (Kasson 186-87). John Kasson observes that this period of economic uncertainty led to a surge of utopian and dystopian literature in the 1890s. If society could not

adequately control its industrial technology, writers like Mark Twain and William Dean Howells argued, major social crises would be inevitable.

Journalists soon joined novelists in expressing doubts about industry. From 1900 to 1910, popular magazines published damning exposés of the beef industry, the coal industry, the railroads, and the drug business (Marchand 42).<sup>2</sup> Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel *The Jungle* and Margaret Byington's 1910 sociological study *Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town*, among others, drew public attention to industry's abuses. Byington begins her text by identifying industry as a blight on the landscape. Describing Homestead, a town that had recently been ravaged by the Homestead Steel Strike of 1892, she notes that "the banks of the brown Monongahela are preempted on one side by the railroad, on the other by unsightly stretches of mill yards. Gray plumes of smoke hang heavily from the stacks of the long, low mill buildings, and noise and effort dominate what once were quiet pasture lands" (3). For Byington and Sinclair, smoke, dirt, and underpaid labor trumped depictions of shiny machines and well-groomed workers. These writers were distancing themselves from the American tradition of celebrating industry and instead reviving nineteenth-century British skepticism about the factory.

In response to the rise of exposés, corporations took action. Between 1890 and 1910, the newly emerging field of public relations combated muckraking journalism and marketed the industrial sublime (Marchand 42). In the 1890s, the H.J. Heinz Company in Pittsburgh and the National Cash Register Company in Dayton, Ohio began opening their factory doors to the public to display production as a tourist attraction. The factory tour soon became a staple of the American industrial experience, and factories began to shape segments of their manufacturing process into narrated theatrics for visitors. Owners often

installed glass, overhead walkways, and partitions to separate visitors from the shop floor, and guides impressed tourists with statistics detailing the vast scale of production. Enormous machines, massive quantities of raw materials, and rows of interchangeable workers all contributed to the factory spectacle. Viewers took pride in American economic success and technological ingenuity while the tour guide demonstrated the safety and cleanliness of the industrial operation (Littmann).<sup>3</sup> Eager to supplement the factory tour, public relations firms and corporations themselves advertised the factory as a positive feature of the landscape, publishing postcards or print ads displaying the factory as part of the nation's scenery (Marchand 31).

Although we associate positive representations of factories largely with such public relations projects, even socialists and labor rights advocates sometimes adopted positive representations of the industrial space. For these groups, the factory was not only a source of danger and exploitation but also the site of potential revolutionary sentiment and, thus, a symbol of hope. In Marx's conception of the socialist future, industry, under the control of its workers, would be responsible for using its advanced technologies to feed, house, and clothe the people. As a result, radical images of the "industrial" accommodated both exploitation and the possibility of a utopian future. Diego Rivera's 1932 mural in the Detroit Institute of Arts, for example, depicts the strong hands and arms of auto workers intertwined to mimic a maze of industrial piping. In Rivera's art, the worker becomes intimately linked to machinery because he is beginning to transform the metal into something more human. In the early decades of the twentieth century, this side of industry held particular resonance for African Americans. The prevalence of Jim Crow laws in southern states and the abundance of industrial jobs in the North led many



African Americans from the rural South to associate the North with the promise of better jobs and less virulent racism. Although participants in the Great Migration learned quickly that Northern industrial spaces were not free of racism or exploitation, many African Americans saw a source of resistant power in their new industrial roles.

After the 1930s, however, when factories seemed to be the key place for resistance, American unions failed to adopt increased militancy, and the relatively high wages that workers had won made “industry” a symbol of conservative financial stability throughout the middle of the twentieth century. As a result, when students began to revolt in the 1960s, they often viewed industrial workers as unlikely dissenters.<sup>4</sup> And in 1973, Daniel Bell added a new layer to this perceived working-class impotence when he predicted that the US was transitioning into a “post-industrial” society. The rise of the information age and the shift from manufacturing to service-sector production challenged both industrial models of dissent and American understandings of the “industrial.”

These shifts did not, however, herald the disappearance of the “industrial” as either a cultural signifier or a site of resistance.<sup>5</sup> While the factory tour is a rarity among major corporations today, and few public relations departments would advertise factories as beauties of the natural landscape, the spectacle of industrial production remains an element of twenty-first century advertising. In place of factory tours, many corporations now build stand-alone tourist attractions that they market as “museums.” If museums document human achievement and natural history, corporate “museums” position both products and profits as cultural achievements and wonders of the natural world. Coke’s “World of Coca-Cola” makes this claim explicit when it refers to Coca-Cola products as

“artifacts.” The history of its branding strategies, Coca-Cola tells us, is the history of American culture.

In addition to displaying their products as “artifacts,” these facilities also feature mock-ups of industrial production. At Hershey’s international headquarters in Pennsylvania, visitors can ride through a “factory” in the role of cocoa beans, and tourists at Coca-Cola’s Atlanta attraction view a fully automated bottling plant—with no workers in sight (Littmann 81). This worker-less factory obscures the corporation’s real problems with labor issues. In Colombia, workers who bottle Coke have faced the prospect of murder, kidnapping, or torture by local paramilitaries after their attempts to organize.<sup>6</sup> To mask these realities, Coca-Cola has portrayed the bottling plant as a site of the “industrial sublime” by removing real workers from its representations. In a recent ad titled “The Happiness Factory,” for example, Coca-Cola transforms the industrial process into pure fantasy. The ad begins when a young man slips a coin into a Coke machine. The camera pans to the inside of the machine, where the coin falls into a fantasy factory in which animated creatures bottle Coke through a series of magical steps. The coin rolls down a green hill into the arms of two tiny humanoid creatures in yellow hard hats, who guide it into a mechanical lever. Fat creatures fitted with helicopter attachments then carry an empty bottle into another contraption, and it is filled by a descending automated arm. After a host of furry, big-lipped beings kiss the bottle and a lever caps it, another mechanical arm shuttles it into a snowy paradise, where penguin-like creatures cool the drink. Finally, the chilled bottle moves down a conveyor belt in the midst of a parade. Creatures dance and throw streamers while a crowd cheers and fireworks fly. At the end of the commercial, the bottle falls off the conveyor belt and into the Coke machine. The

young man retrieves his Coke, oblivious to the magical “industrial” world that produced it. In this ad, Coca-Cola presents a twenty-first century version of the industrial sublime. The most satisfying and romantic elements of the industrial process, including mechanical arms and conveyor belts, merge with computer animation to produce a fantasy version of industrial production. Because real workers in factories might spark associations with labor strife, Coke assures viewers that industrial magic remains in the form of a Disney-like dream factory and its articulation of commodity fetishism.

While Coca-Cola might avoid depicting workers because of the international boycott that Colombian workers have declared against it, other contemporary advertisers continue to invoke imagery of the industrial worker. The 2008 ad campaign for Post’s Honey Bunches of Oats breakfast cereal, for instance, depicts factory workers wearing helmets and hairnets as they travel around the country on a Honey Bunches of Oats tour bus (according to Post’s “Behind the Scenes” video, they are actual factory workers and not actors). Their job is to accost bystanders around the country, asking them to taste Honey Bunches of Oats, and in every shot they appear as smiling advertisers of their product. Even on the bus, they eat cereal and play games with cereal boxes. In this series, workers are removed from their factory setting but *look like* they are still in it. Hairnets and helmets, not factory labor, are their key identifying features, and as a result they become real-life incarnations of Coca-Cola’s computer animated creatures or Keebler’s cartoon elves. Their factory work is invisible, and their days are spent cheerfully celebrating the company product.

Post and Coca-Cola both demonstrate that the industrial metaphor remains a key component of the American cultural vocabulary, despite the fact that environmentalism

has changed the public attitude toward smokestacks and the loss of union jobs has shifted the aspirations of many American youth away from industrial jobs. John Kerry still felt the need to don a hard hat in his attempt to garner working-class votes in the 2004 elections, and a United Auto Workers strike in 2007 brought the auto industry back to the forefront of the daily news. The industrial worker continues to hold a large metaphorical share in the notion of what it means to be an American, and the factory retains its position as a symbol of economic prosperity and community security.

### **The Anthropological, Aesthetic, and Racialized Primitive**

Few would doubt the centrality of industrial metaphors to leftist projects, but primitive tropes have been less frequently examined. This oversight may be partially due to the fact that many activists have rightly rejected the term “primitive” as a demeaning marker of lesser development. In this study, I have chosen to use the term “primitive” not because anything I place under this rubric really deserves to be labeled as such. Instead, I invoke the term precisely for its troubling history, examining what we might call the “global primitive” in all its evocations and contradictions.

The “primitive” has been used as both an anthropological and an aesthetic signifier. In both cases, assumptions about race have guided its definition. Explorers and colonists understood the “primitives” of Africa, the Pacific, and the Americas as remnants of an earlier period in human history, and they separated themselves from these native people by ascribing essentialized traits to both “primitive” and “civilized” peoples. While colonists defined whites of the West as rational, civilized, hierarchical, and situated in history, they viewed “primitive” peoples as emotional, sexual, irrational, violent, communal, and eternally mired in one moment of time.<sup>7</sup> Definitions of the West

as fully human and the “primitive” as animalistic not only justified colonization and slavery, they became a source of fascination for Europeans. The “primitive” entered European literature and popular culture as a source of entertainment and excitement.

In anthropology, primitive was traditionally used to describe societies with a “lesser” state of development than Western civilization. Hunter-gatherers and those who live in tribal societies have most often earned the appellation, though any society without “modern” technologies could fall into this category. As late as the 1980s, anthropologists who examined hunter-gatherer cultures often viewed their subjects as the legacy of an ancient human experience. By observing the tools and social relationships of these cultures, researchers believed, we could learn about our former selves. Only in the last several decades has this notion been discredited, as many scholars have put contemporary hunter-gatherers back into the historical narrative, noting that their cultures are changing rather than static and that hunter-gatherer society has always interacted with and adapted its ways based on relationships with neighboring cultures.<sup>8</sup>

In aesthetic terms, “primitive” was originally applied to art produced by non-professionals or to the work of pre-Renaissance artists by their counterparts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Knapp 366; Rhodes 628). In the early twentieth century, “primitive” became popular as a descriptor of art created by anthropologically “primitive” peoples. Paul Gauguin infused Tahitian imagery into his art in the 1890s, and avant-garde French artists like Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and André Derain became interested in African sculpture a decade later. For these artists, “primitive” cultures and their art appeared interchangeable rather than grounded in geographical or historical specifics. According to Sieglinde Lemke, artists “indiscriminately referred to African,

Oceanic, and Native American art as *art nègre*. They did not differentiate among contemporary African art, ‘primitive art,’ and ‘Negro art’” (39).

This aesthetic notion of “primitive” art contributed to the emergence of modernism in European visual arts, and it inspired more narrow aesthetic movements such as Cubism, Fauvism, and Dadaism in the first decades of the twentieth century. In all of these cases, the “primitive” attracted artists for both formal and anthropological reasons. Gauguin used striking colors and two-dimensional figures to challenge naturalistic representations in European art and to present his Tahitian subjects as romantic, sensual, and mysterious. Picasso likewise embraced the geometric, abstract forms of African masks in his famous 1907 painting *Les Femmes d’Alger*,<sup>9</sup> initiating Cubism by replacing human faces with angular, non-representational masks. At the same time, he was fascinated by the role of the mask in tribal life: “the masks weren’t like other kinds of sculpture,” he commented in a 1937 discussion with André Malraux. “Not at all. They were magical things. [ . . . ] They were weapons. To help people stop being dominated by spirits, to become independent. Tools” (Flam and Deutch 33).<sup>10</sup> For Picasso, who knew little about the specific histories of these masks, “primitive” art meant a breakdown between the functional and the purely aesthetic. He believed that African art did not exist for its own sake but for the sake of mystical, spiritual interactions. The anthropological role of African sculpture in tribal life, in other words, was just as important for Picasso as the new geometric forms it offered. His anthropological notions, moreover, guided his understanding of the interventions he was making in European art.

Art historians have typically referred to Picasso and his cohort as part of a trend in “primitivist modernism” or “modernist primitivism.” Although it began among French

painters, primitivist modernism spread to other regions and art forms in the ensuing decades. German Expressionists took the movement beyond France, and it soon appeared throughout Europe in a variety of aesthetic forms. Dadaists, for instance, brought the “primitive” into performance art during “African Nights” at Zurich’s Cabaret Voltaire, where mock-“Negro” poems and African masks titillated both the performers and the audience, while Alberto Giacometti’s 1926 sculpture *Spoon Woman* incorporated primitivist ideas into an enormous sculpture reminiscent of carved African spoons (Flam and Deutch 12). Gertrude Stein’s 1909 short story “Melanctha” indicated that primitivism was not limited to Europe or the visual and performative arts. Stein claimed to have been with Picasso when he saw his first African sculpture, and she, too, became intrigued by African art (Flam and Deutch 35). “Melanctha,” Michael North argues, allowed Stein to metaphorically put on an African mask when she depicted an autobiographical experience through the eyes of an African-American narrator who speaks in dialect and exhibits “primitive” qualities (North). With this text, Stein began to translate anthropological definitions of the tribal “primitive” into associations between the “primitive” and race, which she applied to African Americans.

North’s claim that Stein participated in primitivist modernism is significant because scholars often exclude the United States from this form of modernism. African art objects made a particular impact on European artists because they appeared in European museums as artifacts collected during colonial expeditions. Paris’s *Musée d’ethnographie du Trocadéro*, which presented “primitive” art from around the world, sparked the interests of Picasso and others in African art. In the United States, on the other hand, colonial relationships were more limited. Although the US occupied the

Philippines, Guam, Samoa, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico in the early twentieth century, it had no military or imperial links to Africa. It had only the history of African slavery and a large population of African-American people. For Americans, Africa and the “primitive,” which seemed synonymous in European understandings, were filtered through the lens of American race relations. Consequently, although American artists and writers sometimes used “primitive” metaphors, as Stein did in “Melanctha,” they have rarely been classified in the same category as Europe’s primitivist modernists.<sup>11</sup>

Sieglinde Lemke’s study *Primitivist Modernism* asks us to give more consideration to the trans-Atlantic travel of aesthetic primitivism, however, when she argues that it appeared in America primarily among black rather than white artists. Citing writers and visual artists like Alain Locke, Zora Neale Hurston, and Loïs Mailou Jones, Lemke observes that European modernism’s interest in African art forms led African-Americans to explore metaphors of Africa and the “primitive” as celebrations of their own identity. Some black artists responded to the primitivist trend by claiming ownership over the tropes that defined Africa as exotic, emotional, and erotic. Poet Helene Johnson, for instance, identified with the “primitive” in her 1927 “Poem” while acknowledging the disjuncture between the African “primitive” and African Americans: “What do I know / About tom-toms?,” she asked, “But I like the word, sort of, / Don’t you? It belongs to us” (38). By adopting primitivist imagery and rhetoric, she grappled with the relationship between contemporary Africa, African ancestors, and the discourse of Africa generated by primitivism. Similarly, visual artist Loïs Mailou Jones justified her imitation of African masks and Egyptian art by insisting that “if anybody had the right to use it, I did. It was my heritage,” while writer Alain Locke employed primitivism by celebrating



“authentic” blackness in place of “degenerate exoticism and fake primitivism” (Benjamin x; qtd. in Lemke 51; Locke 130; qtd. in Lemke 89). This nuanced and sometimes resistant primitivism in the black community prefigured black nationalist and Afrocentric invocations of the “primitive” that would emerge much later in the century and which will be the focus of my first two chapters.

For black American artists during this era, primitivism allowed a celebration of one’s African heritage, but it also reflected problematic race relations with the white public. White artists in the Harlem Renaissance like Vachel Lindsay, wealthy patrons like Charlotte Osgood Mason, or combinations of the two like Carl Van Vechten often inspired negative feelings among black artists. Langston Hughes’s poetry, for instance, represents African Americans as spiritually linked to Africa. As he writes in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” “I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins. / My soul has grown deep like the rivers. / I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young. / I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep. / I looked upon the Nile and raised pyramids above it” (Rampersad 73). In these lines, Hughes links African Americans to Egypt, the Congo, and even the Middle Eastern Euphrates, suggesting that the speaker is spiritually connected to these disparate sites by his dark skin. His romantic sentiments evaporated, however, when his white patron made the same connections. As Hughes wrote in his autobiography:

she [Mason] wanted me to be primitive and know and feel the intuitions of the primitive. But, unfortunately, I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did. I was only an American Negro—who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa—but I was not Africa. I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem. And I was not what she wanted me to be. (Hughes 326)

Here, Hughes denies the links that were so crucial to “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” Although a spiritual association to Africa was liberating in his own hands, he becomes frustrated when Mason expects it. His African-American status, he insists, gives him access *only* to “the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa” and not to the realities of the continent and its cultures. Instead, he identifies with American cities—not the trope of “urban America” but a collection of cities that are specifically familiar to him. Hughes grew up in Lawrence, Kansas, not far from Kansas City; his mother and step-father later lived in Chicago while he was in high school, and as an adult he wrote columns for the *Chicago Defender*; and he spent a great deal of his adult life in Broadway and Harlem. By naming these cities, Hughes insists on the particularity of his *own* identity rather than the universality of all black identity.

Jamaican Harlem Renaissance poet Claude McKay exhibited similar ambivalence about primitivism in white and black hands. In his poem “Outcast,” he imagines the joy of black Americans returning to a “primitive” Africa: “my soul would sing forgotten jungle songs. / I would go back to darkness and to peace,” he wrote (Rampersad 26). In his autobiography *A Long Way from Home*, however, McKay becomes frustrated with Frank Harris, the white editor of *Pearson’s Magazine* who gives McKay his first literary break. Upon meeting McKay for the first time, Harris mulls over which “African type” McKay resembles (McKay 10). Angry with the racialized assumptions of whites, McKay strikes back by identifying racist whites with animalistic or exotic metaphors: *Liberator* editor Robert Minor becomes a “powerful creature of the jungle” after he announces that “a negro is like a rugged tree in a forest”; Fabian socialist George Bernard Shaw transforms into an “antelope” after remarking that McKay should have become a boxer

rather than a poet; and a young white woman at a dinner party earns the label of “exotic” when she expresses surprise that McKay is not a servant (103, 61, 117). For both Hughes and McKay, primitivism offers the potential for liberating, self-affirming attitudes about black culture, but it also carries the weight of white racism.

As the behavior of white patrons and onlookers indicates, American expressions of primitivism during this period were not limited to African Americans. Although American primitivism didn’t always conform to European understandings of modernism, it did emerge in conjunction with new trends in literature and music as well as pop culture. Many young whites became fascinated by Harlem and its culture of black music and arts, and they flocked to venues that offered “safe” opportunities for slumming, such as Harlem’s segregated Cotton Club, where Duke Ellington played “jungle music” surrounded by a décor that mixed depictions of an African jungle and a Southern plantation (Lawrence 106, 117, 119). “You go sort of primitive up there,” white musician and actor Jimmy Durante remarked about his experiences at the Cotton Club (Lawrence 118; Durante and Kofoed 114). Similarly, white poet Vachel Lindsay’s 1914 piece “The Congo” intersperses scenes of African-American life in the gambling hall and the church with wild depictions of Africa where “tattooed cannibals danced in files.” The chant of “Mumbo-Jumbo will hoodoo you” echoes at the end of each section, and each transition from an American setting to an African one is marked by two lines of capital letters: “THEN I SAW THE CONGO, CREEPING THROUGH THE BLACK, / CUTTING THROUGH THE FOREST WITH A GOLDEN TRACK” (Lindsay 3-11). During the modernist period, then, primitivism invaded the American cultural scene even if African carvings were not the center of inspiration, as they were in Europe. For Americans,

“Africa” evoked images of the jungle and tribal life, but these referents attached themselves to African-American culture.

### *Pop Culture and the Primitive*

Thus far, I have examined anthropological and aesthetic definitions of the “primitive,” each of which has a disciplinary history in the academy. The metaphor of the “primitive” and the appreciation for the primitive known as “primitivism,” however, are not limited to these definitions. The terms have been used in Western culture in a variety of ways that cannot be classified simply according to academic definitions. These cultural connotations of the primitive, moreover, linger in academic definitions of the aesthetic and anthropological primitives.<sup>12</sup> Not limited to the modern era, these connotations can include longings for a past era, a tribal social structure, and a more intense connection to nature. In 1935, Lovejoy and Boas devoted an entire volume to primitivism in antiquity, even tracing it to Homer’s *Iliad*, which includes reminiscences about the days of great heroes before corruption set in.

For the purposes of this project, however, I will focus on the cultural history of primitivism that emerged in the United States under the influence of European colonialism and American slavery. As imperialism spread across the globe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, representations of “primitive” and “civilized” life shaped understandings of race. Both the colonial powers of Europe and the slave-holding United States employed discourses of the primitive to justify relationships of power and exploitation. Charles Darwin’s 1859 *Origin of the Species* and Herbert Spencer’s subsequent theory of social Darwinism seemed to confirm the possibility that there were biological and evolutionary differences to support these hierarchies.<sup>13</sup> Such classifications

also erased the distinctions between tribal Africans and African-Americans by suggesting that race rather than tribal social structure could define one's status as "primitive."

Stereotypes of blackness in the United States consequently merged metaphors of American slavery and African colonial history. Minstrel shows offered a prime example, where blackface performers mixed depictions of African-Americans as plantation slaves and "Mammies" with references to their "savage" behavior. Eric Lott cites an 1846 reviewer of the minstrel "Ethiopian Serenaders" that describes performers as "animated by savage energy" with "white eyes roll[ing] in a curious frenzy" (qtd. in Lott 140).<sup>14</sup> Minstrelsy's focus on "frenzied" dance recalled longstanding colonial images of "primitive" cultures engaged in ritual dance. Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush trace the recurrence of "orgiastic dancing and drumming" in representations of "primitive" peoples from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries. The minstrel shows and their star Jim Crow character grew out of a similar fascination with "orgiastic" dancing. Ralph Ellison saw this connection as crucial to the racial politics of minstrelsy: "These Negroes of fiction are counterfeits," he wrote. "They are projected aspects of an internal symbolic process through which, like a primitive tribesman dancing himself into the group frenzy necessary for battle, the white American prepares himself emotionally to perform a social role" (Ellison 29-30). By donning blackface as slaves and "tribesmen," Ellison argues, white Americans not only expressed a desire for the tribal "primitive," but they also affirmed their power as slaveholders by comparing themselves to European colonialists.

During the antebellum period, the connection between race and evolutionary inferiority affected other ethnic groups in addition to African Americans, and the process occurred both in the United States and Britain. As David Roediger and Anne McClintock

note, the Irish also carried a reputation in both Britain and America as “primitive,” receiving labels like “low-browed and savage, groveling and bestial, lazy and wild, simian and sensual” (Roediger 133). Depictions of the working-class Irish in the news media often portrayed them as apelike or dark-skinned, suggesting that “primitive” status conferred animalistic traits in addition to pre-industrial ones. Anne McClintock argues that class could also identify one as “primitive,” and she cites the drawings of British lawyer Arthur Munby as evidence. Munby conflated class, race, and evolutionary status when he portrayed working-class women with black faces and stereotypically “primitive” features such as exaggerated lips and simian faces (105-11).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the trans-Atlantic similarities in representations of race and progress became stronger with the popularity of the World’s Fair and other international exhibitions. Beginning with London’s Great Exhibition in 1851, industrial progress and its roots in “primitive” human states became the center of major public events. The Great Exhibition celebrated the progress of imperial England in public displays of industry, art, science, and architecture. Paris’s *Exposition Universelle* heightened the distinctions between the “civilized” and the “primitive” by presenting colonial exhibits as a form of entertainment. Beginning with replicas of Algerian bazaars and belly dancers in 1867 and growing into reconstructions of “primitive” Tahitian villages by 1889, French exhibitions encouraged visitors to see the colonies as exotic and enticing (Çelik and Kinney; Barkan and Bush 8).

Because the European expositions were international events, these ethnographic and colonial exhibits attracted the attention of Americans and inspired their own World’s Fair displays. The first international American fair, the Philadelphia Centennial

Exhibition of 1876, portrayed Native Americans in much the same way, presenting a full-scale replica of a teepee and wax statues of Native American people (Rydell 22-27). By the Chicago exhibition of 1893, coordinators had expanded the Native American exhibit to include actual Native American people, and in 1904 the St. Louis World's Fair advertised America's own colonial adventures by creating a mock Filipino village (63; Barkan and Bush 3). Exhibits like these fascinated and inspired artists from Gauguin to T.S. Eliot (Barkan and Rush 8-9).<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Gauguin's interest in the Tahitian exhibits as an inspiration for his art reveals how the cultural and aesthetic histories of primitivism intertwine. Modernist primitivism did not emerge suddenly or unexpectedly in the early twentieth century. It grew out of a long history of primitive representations in American and European popular culture.

### **Junctures: Primitive Meets Industrial and Politics Meet Literature**

The tradition of international exhibitions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries illustrates why I examine metaphors of the primitive and the industrial *together*. At America's Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876, visitors could experience both the "industrial sublime" of the Corliss steam engine and the "primitive" habits of Native American life. Similarly, the modernist period in art incorporated "primitive" representations into the Western metropolis, where skyscrapers and steel were the center of modern architecture. These two terms were often yoked together in an attempt to make sense of progress, modernity, and race, and they were never used solely as a binary. Instead, the "industrial" and the "primitive" often became intertwined and conflated.

Leo Marx illustrates this observation in his seminal text *The Machine in the Garden*, which traces the pastoral tradition in American literature. Marx distinguishes

pastoralism from primitivism by maintaining that pastoralism depicts nature that has been *improved*. Pastoralism idealizes not the threatening, uncontrollable “wilderness” but the tamed gardens and pastures of a nation that combines progress with natural beauty. Although American literature was sometimes wary of the industrial “machine” that threatened to destroy the pristine landscape, Marx notes that American writers were also willing to see industry as a supplement to the landscape and a means of maintaining it with less human labor. Despite Marx’s desire to separate the pastoral from the primitive, his definition of the pastoral reflects the ways that metaphors of the primitive and the industrial often merge with one another. The pastoral, with its idealized vision of nature, simply reflects a positive reconciliation between the exciting, frightening wilderness and the safe cultivation of the landscape by both humans and machines.

In other circumstances, confrontations between primitive and industrial were less pleasant. Eugene O’Neill’s 1922 play *The Hairy Ape* treats a combination of the primitive and the industrial that merges the most threatening aspects of each. O’Neill’s character Mildred Douglas, a steel heiress, originally imagines that the industrial world holds power, and she wants to experience it:

I would like to be sincere, to touch life somewhere. But I’m afraid I have neither the vitality nor integrity. [. . .] I’m a waste product in the Bessemer process—like the millions. Or rather, I inherit the acquired trait of the by-product, wealth, but none of the energy, none of the strength of the steel that made it. (O’Neill 21)

When Mildred enthusiastically enters the stokehole of a ship, where protagonist Yank and his fellow workers shovel coal into the furnaces, she finds that industry resembles the menacing “primitive.” The workers, bare-chested and covered in coal, assume the “crouching, inhuman attitudes of chained gorillas,” and Yank shouts with angry abandon at the bosses who push him to a physical breaking point (29). The flaming furnace and



the clanging noise of the work transform the industrial machine into a frightening, lifelike object, and the men are racially marked by the coal dust, appearing both black and gorilla-like. Yank's masculine aggression, punctuated by his link to the gorilla when he pounds his chest, further signals to Mildred that she has left "civilized" society, and she faints in fear. For O'Neill, primitive and industrial metaphors intersect in their most troubling forms. The stereotypical, racialized "primitive" figure and the horrifying foreignness of industrial production join, generating an embodied, animalistic, working-class "primitive" in opposition to a feminized, intellectual civilization.

Just as O'Neill demonstrated that the threatening aspects of the primitive and the industrial could become one and Leo Marx identified the pastoral as a positive combination of the primitive and the industrial, Jean Toomer indicated that the erotic elements of the primitive and the industrial could likewise couple. Just one year after *The Hairy Ape*, Toomer's 1923 novel *Cane* portrays both the "primitive" South and the "industrial" North through an ecstatic, eroticized lens. His novel, he reflected, "was a swan-song" for the traditions of the rural South that he feared were doomed as black Americans moved into the "modern desert" of the industrial city (*The Wayward and the Seeking* 123). But his language awards more vital energy to the city than a "desert" might suggest. "Her Lips Are Copper Wire," a poem in his most famous text, *Cane*, portrays female sexuality through the industrial metaphors of copper wire and electricity: "press your lips to mine / till they are incandescent," he writes (*Cane* 54). Toomer reveals that this intense relationship to industrial technology is not his narrator's alone, stating in his autobiography "Earth-Being" that, "Copper sheets were as marvelous to me as the petals of flowers; the smell of electricity was as thrilling as the smell of earth after a spring

shower” (*The Wayward and the Seeking* 43). In moments like these, industrial technology appears as though it were natural, occurring without human labor. The electricity and copper sheets come alive as if by magic, suggesting that industry can mimic the erotic appeal of the natural “primitive.”

Toomer, O’Neill, and Leo Marx offer only three examples of the primitive and the industrial as intertwining metaphors. Twentieth-century American activists, I will argue, have performed, written, and envisioned these links in a variety of ways. For activists, these two terms are particularly significant because they tackle basic questions about our social structure and its relative merits. Are we progressing from tribal societies to an industrialized socialist utopia? Or have we regressed from our original state of human cooperation? Which cultural or technological tools are salvageable in a post-revolutionary society, and which must we jettison? These are some of the questions posed by the texts I analyze in this project.

### **“Primitive” and “Industrial” as Activist Utopias**

For both anarchists and socialists, revolution depends on what Wilson Jeremiah Moses labels (in his case among Afrocentric scholars) the historiographies of progress and decline. Just as Afrocentrists have simultaneously identified ancient Africa as a lost ideal civilization and stressed the need for African development to meet Western notions of progress, radical activists toyed with competing views of progress and decline. Marxists have traditionally believed in a progressive view of humanity. Karl Marx notes that “primitive communism” existed among tribal peoples, but he does not view this as an ideal to be imitated. Instead, he posits that the socialist future will incorporate industrial technology to provide affluent lives for all. The “primitive” moment, absent property

rights and capitalism, generally serves as a source of nostalgia but not a model for the future. Anarchists, on the other hand, have more varied views on the “primitive” and the “industrial.” While some envision utopia as an equitable industrial society much like Marx’s socialism, others *do* view “primitive” cultures as an ideal for the future. For activists who adopt the latter perspective, the neo-“primitive” will emerge only after the revolution leads to the fall of civilization and most of its technological advances.

My study of American socialist and anarchist metaphors will begin in the 1960s, when anti-colonial revolutions had erupted around the globe and segregation had come to a breaking point at home. Based in the “land without socialism,” American activists sought validation from the international history of revolutionary struggle. Many attempted to imitate industrial revolutionaries, guerrilla fighters, or peasant insurgents because of their interest in recent revolutions in Eastern Europe, Africa, Cuba, and Asia. Some took factory jobs while others adopted the militarist look of Third World guerrillas by donning berets, rifles, and guerrilla-inspired clothing. Anxiety about the American potential for revolution led US activists to write and perform the role of ideal revolutionary—a character, they suggested, that is not an organic national product.

Socialists in this period were forced to question teleological understandings of the “industrial,” the “primitive,” and socialist development. Contrary to Marx’s expectations, revolutions had emerged not from the most developed industrial countries but from underdeveloped and colonized nations such as Russia and China, and as a result, activists began to question whether industrial progress was the key to the socialist future. What did it mean that the Soviet revolution did not precipitate a socialist revolution in Western Europe, as Lenin and Trotsky predicted? How could socialists resolve their ideology with

the corruption and human rights abuses that arose in the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba? Teleology became especially complicated when revolutionary idols like Lenin, Trotsky, Che Guevara, and Mao died throughout the twentieth century, leaving socialists to fantasize not only about a utopian future but also about a nostalgic past.

Primitive metaphors increased in importance beginning in 1966, when the Black Power movement sparked a popular interest in African dress, traditions, and languages among African Americans. Similar phenomena occurred in other communities. Members of the American Indian Movement re-claimed the racist identification of Native Americans as “red” people when they declared “red power” (a parallel term to Black Power that also expressed inter-ethnic solidarity) and revived community interest in traditional religious ceremonies, dress, and hairstyles. Mexican-Americans in the Chicano Movement announced that they were the indigenous people of California and the Southwest, which they named Aztlán after the legendary birthplace of the Aztec people. For Chicanos and Native Americans as well as African Americans, claiming pride in one’s ethnic identity meant embracing a time before or a space apart from contemporary American life. In other words, members of these movements viewed their ideal ethnic identities through metaphors of the primitive, *including* tropes with racist histories.<sup>16</sup>

While ethnic nationalist groups of the 1960s and ‘70s had many ideological differences, they shared a broadly defined socialist perspective. After this era came to a close, however, anarchists began to replace socialists as the key figures in American radicalism. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union confirmed the suspicions of many radicals that state socialism was a lost cause, and anarchism seemed to be a viable alternative, especially to the generation of young activists who were angry about free

trade policies and loan repayment plans that imposed rigid “austerity programs” on Third World nations. In response, many embraced anarchist federations as an alternative to the nation-state. Unlike their socialist predecessors, few anarchists today view industry as a key to future affluence and justice. Instead, some envision a technological future that incorporates environmentalist and egalitarian values while others imagine that civilization is destined to collapse, forcing humans into small hunter-gatherer societies.

Based on the broad history of radical tropes that I have outlined, I will examine the trajectory of activist metaphors in the latter half of the twentieth century through four movements. I will emphasize the New Left era of the 1960s, which illustrates how primitive and industrial metaphors collided at the juncture of orthodox Marxism and ethnic nationalism. The final chapter offers a comparative perspective, demonstrating how anarchists have borrowed from and modified the primitive and industrial metaphors of their New Left ancestors. Moreover, I will demonstrate how each movement comments on, interacts with, or replicates the metaphorical concerns of contemporary works in African-American literature. While activists can bring life and political substance to literary metaphors, creative writers frequently point to complexity and ethical ambiguity in political projects. Each chapter will illuminate these relationships through literary readings in addition to analyses of political texts and imagery.

Chapter One argues that the Black Panther Party is not only a participant in the Black Power movement but a part of the Black Arts Movement. This chapter focuses on the group’s choice of the panther, a racialized figure, and its manipulation of this trope in public discourse. By juxtaposing the panther and a host of primitivist metaphors with stories that detailed current events in Africa, the Third World, and post-industrial

America in its newspaper, the organization attempted to re-write the panther into a signifier of revolution. It succeeded in some cases, while in others it simply allowed the public to reinvigorate the racist primitivist tradition. The Panthers' invocation of such metaphors, in addition to their concrete links to black artists, offered theoretical as well as political contributions to the Black Arts Movement.

Chapter Two examines the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, an organization founded in 1969 that identified the black industrial worker as the center of revolutionary resistance. Its infusion of "primitive" imagery into its texts challenged organized labor's racially charged insistence that "civilized" union-management relations staved off degeneration into an "industrial jungle." League newspapers and an interview with a former League member reveal how, just as many whites and blacks were fascinated by the "primitive," the League and its revolutionary allies were drawn to the "industrial" as a site of both beauty and fear. While the Black Panthers lionized the lumpenproletariat as a revolutionary replacement for industrial workers, the League broadened the definition of "worker" to include much of the black community. In doing so, the group articulated a revolutionary strategy and an ideological link between African-American identity, industrial capitalism, and black nationalism.

Chapter Three turns to the tradition of socialists taking factory jobs and organizing radical unions "from the inside." An examination of the International Socialists [IS] and the Socialist Workers Party [SWP] in the 1970s and early 1980s illustrates how this strategy was a means of coping with the demise of Black Power. It was also an attempt to revise New Left projects that had rejected inter-generational cooperation. At the same time, African-American writers were undertaking a similar

venture when they wrote neo-slave narratives in order to record and vicariously participate in everyday slave life. Just as socialists revived inter-generational labor organizing after a decade of student activism, neo-slave narratives redefined despised figures like the “Mammy” or the “Uncle Tom” in response to the black nationalist sentiments of the 1960s. Socialists and authors both saw the process of *becoming* industrial workers or slaves as a means of establishing a political identity. Interviews with socialist participants, publications of the IS and the SWP, Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada*, and Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* demonstrate how these two trends responded to the end of the Black Power era.

Chapter Four addresses contemporary anarchists who have responded to the tropes of their Marxist ancestors. Although anarchists often reject the industrial world in favor of “primitive” lifestyles, their primitivist ideals rely on industrial infrastructure. Thus, when they squat in the remnants of abandoned buildings, it is the industrial setting that acts as the foundation for a new “primitive.” This chapter reads anarchist “zines” in concert with Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring* to demonstrate how anarchists have both succeeded and failed in their new uses of primitive tropes. Although anarchists successfully use primitive and industrial metaphors to incorporate an environmentalist critique into anti-capitalist ideology, they fail to account for the racialized histories of primitivism. Butler and Hopkinson uncover the gaps in anarchist understandings of race while illuminating the potential that anarchists have for building political connections outside their own communities.

By leaping into the present, moreover, I argue that the tropes of today’s radicals are still grounded in the binary that gripped and guided the movements of the 1960s.

Although activists tend to trace their lineages by political ideology, the metaphorical histories of organizations and the literary histories that saturate our culture are equally important to an understanding of political action. As T.V. Reed insists, by studying the “poetics of social movements,” we can improve the quality and impact of both literature and political activism. At their junctures, we can find politics that is more than propaganda and literature that offers a concrete perspective for political change.

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<sup>1</sup> I do not mean to suggest that studies of political rhetoric have been faulty or inadequate. They do tend to focus, however, on how language is used in manipulative ways to lead and influence a body of people. My study will focus *both* on this purpose and on political language’s ability to engage with cultural and literary forms of its time. Some examples of works that have read political language as manipulative include George Orwell’s famous essay “Politics and the English Language,” published in *Shooting an Elephant, and Other Essays*; András Szántó’s collection *What Orwell Didn’t Know: Propaganda and the New Face of American Politics*; Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro’s *Politicians Don’t Pander*, which presents a theory of “crafted talk”; and William Riker’s *The Art of Political Manipulation*. George Lakoff currently produces interesting work on metaphor in political rhetoric, which he views as both manipulative and useful.

<sup>2</sup> See Roland Marchand for further discussion of early twentieth-century exposés and the corporate response. As cited by Marchand, journalistic accounts of industry included Charles Edward Russell, “The Greatest Trust in the World” published serially in *Everybody’s Magazine* from February-October 1905; Ray Stannard Baker, “Railroads on Trial,” *McClure’s* *McClure’s* 26 (Jan. 1906): 318–31; and Samuel Hopkins Adams, “The Great American Fraud,” *Collier’s*, 7 Oct. 1905, 14–15, 29.

<sup>3</sup> Tours rarely offered the public a view of the entire process. Meatpacking companies, for instance, typically left out views of animal slaughter, the uncomfortably cold areas just following slaughter, and rooms that showcased the industry’s many African-American and Eastern European laborers (Littmann 77).

<sup>4</sup> See chapter three for an examination of these sentiments among New Left activists.

<sup>5</sup> As Robert Rowthorn and Ramana Ramaswamy note in a 1997 study for the International Monetary Fund, the US manufacturing workforce declined between 1965 and 1994 from 28% to 16% of total workers. At the same time, the service sector has grown in the US between 1960 and 1994 from 56% to 73% of all workers. Rowthorn and Ramaswamy argue that this shift reflects not a decline in industrialization but simply a growth in industrial productivity. Jefferson Cowie rejects the simple term “deindustrialization” for a different reason, insisting that our current situation reflects a complex set of social and economic interactions: “Many areas hit hard by ‘deindustrialization’ in the 1980s have recently experienced a renaissance of manufacturing—though often on different terms.” (4). According to *The Economist* in April 2008, the United States ranks third, behind only Germany and China, for global



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merchandise exports, indicating that it has not lost its power as an industrial force ("Economic and Financial Indicators"). Nonetheless, Cowie reminds us that, for many workers and communities, the loss of long-term stability in local industrial jobs is a real casualty of "deindustrialization."

<sup>6</sup> Colombian union SINALTRAINAL has organized an international boycott of Coca-Cola in response to these abuses. In the United States, United Students Against Sweatshops has been a major supporter of this campaign. See [www.cokewatch.org](http://www.cokewatch.org), [www.killercoke.org](http://www.killercoke.org), or Monserrate, et al. for more on Coca-Cola in Colombia.

<sup>7</sup> See Abdul JanMohamed's "The Economy of Manichean Allegory" for an elaboration on how binary categories have been used to define the differences between colonizer and colonized as metaphysical rather than social, cultural, or historical. As JanMohamed argues, "the imperialist is not fixated on specific images or stereotypes of the Other but rather on the affective benefits proffered by the manichean allegory" (68).

<sup>8</sup> See Alan Barnard's *Hunter-Gatherers in History, Archaeology and Anthropology* and Panter-Brick, Layton, and Rowley-Conwy's *Hunter-Gatherers: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* for more on the history of hunter-gatherer studies.

<sup>9</sup> See Lemke's *Primitivist Modernism* for a reading of primitivism, Cubism, and *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*.

<sup>10</sup> This interview originally appeared in André Malraux's 1974 *La Tête d'obsidienne*.

<sup>11</sup> The popularity of African-American dancer Josephine Baker suggests that African-American culture also contributed to European understandings of the "primitive." Although the paintings have been lost, it is believed that Baker posed for Picasso on at least one occasion, making explicit the connection between French pop culture's fascination with the African-American "primitive" and the Cubist interest in "primitive" aesthetics (Wood 138-39; Mao and Walkowitz 172). See Tyler Stovall's *Paris Noir* for more on the links between European modernism and African-American culture.

<sup>12</sup> Sieglinde Lemke attempts to sort out this confusion by identifying four distinctions: chronological, cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic primitivism. Chronological primitivism entails a longing for an idealized historical moment before the corruption of civilization. Cultural primitivism describes the belief that peoples who have been defined as anthropologically "primitive" live simpler, fuller, more human lives than those who live in industrial society. Spiritual primitivism associates the "primitive" with mysterious feelings of sensuous pleasure based on irrationality and perhaps magic. Aesthetic primitivism refers to the appreciation of art forms created by non-Western people. Although Lemke recognizes that these categories are porous, she insists that "aesthetic primitivism is different" because it does not rely on a binary that declares one element inferior to the other. Instead, she argues, aesthetic primitivism generates a hybrid of artistic forms rather than a structure of racism (26-29). Lemke's definitions, based in part on the classifications of Arthur Lovejoy and George Boas, are useful in identifying the different ways the primitive is used, but they are less helpful in outlining distinctions between these invocations of the primitive. As Lemke makes clear in the body of her work, aesthetic primitivism never exists apart from the other forms of primitivism. Picasso, in other words, *does* incorporate formal elements of the "primitive" into his work in strictly aesthetic ways, but he *also* imagines that these formal changes invoke spiritual aspects of the primitive. Similarly, although there is a clear distinction between

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longing for the past and admiring the contemporary lifestyles of tribal peoples, these definitions have never been wholly separate. Until only recently, even anthropologists viewed tribal cultures as living relics from past societies. Cultural primitivism, in other words, has a history in chronological primitivism.

Unlike Lemke, then, I do not separate my analyses of primitivism into categories. Instead, I suggest that the multiple definitions of primitivism interact with one another as part of a confusing and often contradictory set of cultural signifiers. Their other cultural connotations continue to resonate, no matter what classifications we devise.

<sup>13</sup> See Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather* and Robert J.C. Young's *Colonial Desire* for more on theories of racial and species difference in the nineteenth century.

<sup>14</sup> The quotes originate from *Ethiopian Serenaders . . . from the St. James's Theatre, London*. Harvard Theatre Collection, 1846.

<sup>15</sup> See Barkan and Rush's introduction for more on Eliot's interest in the Filipino exhibit at the St. Louis World's Fair and Gauguin's visit to the Tahitian exhibit at the 1889 French Exposition.

<sup>16</sup> While primitivist activist metaphors took on some of their most dramatic and complex forms in the actions of ethnic nationalist organizations, we cannot ignore their importance for interracial and majority white organizations as well. The countercultures of the 1960s embraced primitivist tropes as alternate social ideals, channeling the "primitive" through communes or the adoption of Eastern and tribal religious practices. In doing so, they replicate both traditional primitivist and Orientalist assumptions about the "Other" even as they attempt to distance themselves from the oppression of Western culture.

# ***1***

## ***How the Panther Lost its Spots: Primitivism and the Black Panther Party***

Reflecting on her time as a dancer for the Parisian stage, Josephine Baker wrote in a 1931 poem that “I had a mascot—a panther—Ancestral superstition” (Rose 157). Given her invocation of “ancestral superstition” as an abstract mascot, readers might have assumed she meant a figurative panther. For Baker, however, the panther was both an idea and an actual animal “mascot.” As the African-American woman who brought the *danse sauvage* to Paris in 1925, Baker offered her European audiences erotic dancing with a “primitive” flair (18). Famous for dancing topless in a skirt of bananas, Baker incorporated “African” props and even live animals in her skits and dances. In one sketch she appeared on stage with a panther<sup>1</sup>—an animal that she adopted and walked on a leash through the streets of Paris. While it might have been a literal mascot, it did not deter viewers from linking her figuratively to the animal as well. French novelist Colette, for instance, reflected the racist tradition of associating black bodies with African animals when she addressed an inscription to Baker “to the most beautiful panther.” Looking back on her relationship to the panther in 1931, Baker distanced herself from both literal and figurative associations by describing the panther in the past tense. By contrast, elsewhere in the poem Baker refers to her current state, stressing her American (not African) identity, her beliefs, and her actions: “I do not drink—I am an American / I have a religion / I adore children” (Rose 157). In this list, she separates herself from the past tense panther—the eroticized and racialized animal that once identified her.

As Baker recognized, the panther is not only an animal but a trope, a mascot, and a racial marker. In 1920s Paris, the panther and the *danse sauvage* positioned Baker

within the artistic and cultural movement of modernist primitivism. Like Picasso, who overlaid representations of African masks onto the faces of European women in his *Les Femmes d'Alger*, Baker imported a “primitive,” “African” element into her modern dance, and in her case, the professed connection to Africa or the “primitive” resided largely in her skin color.<sup>2</sup> By distancing herself from the panther mascot at the same time even as she playfully walked a live panther down Paris streets, Baker also attempted to reclaim primitivist representations for the sake of African-American liberation. Like Harlem Renaissance writers and artists who took pride in the “primitive” as a sign of African-American heritage, Baker both benefited from and challenged white racist uses of the primitive.<sup>3</sup>

Baker and her American contemporaries in the Harlem Renaissance inspired black radicals in the 1960s, who again turned to metaphors of Africa and the “primitive” to define African-American identity and achieve black liberation. And although Baker had struggled to escape the racist identification of the Panther, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale were more successful when, more than forty years later, they adopted the animal as the symbol of their budding revolutionary organization. Since then, the Black Panther Party [BPP] has re-defined the meanings of “panther.” When Mos Def and Talib Kweli rap in a 1998 album about “a black cat—a panther,” they expect listeners to know that they allude to the Black Panther Party, not to racialized links between panthers and African Americans (Mos Def and Kweli “Astronomy”). Despite this reorientation of the panther image, the BPP’s selection of such a racially charged trope as the primary symbol of its organization deserves further inquiry. As scholars have returned to the Panthers in

recent years, many have remarked upon the poetic force of the panther symbol, yet none have stopped to examine its relationship to primitivism.

Instead, the array of insightful historical studies that have emerged in the past decade have largely analyzed the Panthers' political decisions, classifying them as serious, if performative, Marxian<sup>4</sup> revolutionaries who rejected the dashikis, African names, and Swahili classes of cultural nationalist<sup>5</sup> activists in favor of interracial coalitions and urban dress. These readings reflect the self-image that the Panthers aimed to create. As Panther Linda Harrison explained in a 1969 issue of the *Black Panther*, “those who believe in the ‘I’m Black and Proud’ theory—believe that there is dignity inherent in wearing naturals; that a buba makes a slave a man [. . .]. In other words cultural nationalism ignores the political and concrete, and concentrates on a myth and fantasy” (Harrison 151).<sup>6</sup> Although Harrison rejects the “myth and fantasy” of African symbolism as a valid political tactic, I want to suggest that, despite its protestations, the organization did not convincingly separate culture—and specifically primitivist tropes—from politics. In fact, I propose that we may usefully read the BPP not only as part of the Black Power and New Left movements but also as part of the Black Arts Movement [BAM]. I do *not* intend to argue that the Panthers were a cultural *rather than* a political organization or that they performed rather than acted out revolutionary politics. I do want to suggest that the literary and visual metaphors of social movements such as the BPP impact their political actions and their organizational success. In this chapter, then, I will analyze Panther rhetoric, physical style, and visual imagery. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to this confluence of strategies as a “political aesthetic.”

As its adoption of the panther image suggests, the Party engaged complicated racialized tropes in an attempt to foster political change. It filtered the “primitive” through political readings of industrial capitalism. Traditional Marxist analyses saw industry simultaneously as a dystopian source of exploitation and the inevitable site of revolutionary resistance. Marx’s factory workers would form the vanguard and, ultimately, transform industrial society into a socialist utopia. In the Panthers’ hometown of Oakland, California, however, industry offered increasingly little to the African-American population. Factories moved to the suburbs, and segregation shuffled black Americans into economically depressed urban ghettos with high unemployment rates even as inner cities suffered disproportionately from the environmental consequences of industrial production. In response, the Panthers turned to the “lumpenproletariat” and the discourse of the primitive in order to revise, not reject, Marx’s industrial capitalist narrative. The “primitive” leaping panther, the African spear and shield, the industrial electric chair, and the post-industrial streets became crucial figures in the BPP’s rhetorical arsenal. They presented, as I will argue, the primitive and the industrial as the poles of capitalism’s global system of exploitation rather than the poles of progress. Industry, the Panthers suggested, did not replace the “primitive” as a civilization “advanced.” Instead, industry generated the “primitive” as its threatening and potentially revolutionary byproduct.

If we see these Panther metaphors as part of the Black Arts Movement, we can also understand how a focus on metaphor became a quandary for the Black Panthers. On the one hand, it offered the group a measure of protection from the law by allowing members to claim that violent declarations were simply metaphors. On the other hand, it

caused internal problems as Panthers themselves became unable to distinguish between metaphors and real plans of action.

### **Radicalism's New Clothes: Black Panther Party Origins**

Before turning to the Black Panther Party's relationship to the Black Arts Movement, I will begin with a brief background of the organization itself. The BPP, originally named the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, was founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, California in 1966. Before branching out on their own, Seale and Newton had been involved in local university activism with the Afro-American Association and the Soul Students Advisory Council [SSAC] at Oakland's Merritt College (Austin 29).<sup>7</sup> They soon became disillusioned with what they perceived as the black capitalist sentiments of the Afro-American Association and the ineffective nature of the SSAC, and in response, they decided to form their own black nationalist organization in the tradition of Malcolm X's Organization of Afro-American Unity (Newton 60-65, 106). In October 1966 they devised the panther name and logo in addition to a declaration titled "What We Want/What We Believe," which outlined ten demands and the political reasons behind those demands. These would later be released regularly in *The Black Panther* newspaper as the "Ten-Point Platform," and they combined Newton and Seale's interests in Marxism (including figures like Fanon, Mao, and Guevara), black nationalism, and the pan-Africanism that had inspired Malcolm X in his last days.<sup>8</sup>

While distributing this document in the black community, Newton and Seale launched their organization by purchasing rifles and instituting a citizen patrol against police brutality. In keeping with a California law that permitted citizens to carry loaded

rifles as long as they were not concealed, Newton, Seale, and their first recruit Bobby Hutton trailed Oakland police officers on duty, stopping to observe police behavior at traffic stops or arrests (Seale 64-77).<sup>9</sup> Newton, who was taking courses at San Francisco Law School, carried law books on patrol so that he could convince skeptical officers of the patrol's legality (Newton 115, 121). These public performances, rife with tension as armed black residents attempted to single-handedly prevent police brutality, sparked local interest and white concern. As a result, Seale and Newton recruited a substantial core of local members in the next six months.

Local notoriety turned into national fame when, in May 1967, Bobby Seale and a group of fellow Panthers carried their rifles into the California legislature in Sacramento. The event, a protest over a bill to ban loaded guns in public places, quickly made the Black Panther Party a household name. The bill was intended as a means of quelling the Panthers' local actions, but instead it sparked nationwide fascination with the group. Soon, Newton and Seale were recruiting members in large numbers and establishing branches all over the country. Organized into a rigid hierarchical structure beneath Oakland's Central Committee, members were expected to wear the Panther uniform of a black jacket, powder-blue shirt, and black beret. Many were full-time activists who lived in group housing with fellow Party members and survived off the meager proceeds of their *Black Panther* newspaper sales. During their days with the organization, they sold the newspaper, participated in military-style drills with weaponry, attended political education classes, organized activist projects, and participated in community service.

Between 1966 and 1971, the Black Panther Party was a cultural force, inspiring other ethnic nationalist groups and challenging white activists to address racism in new



ways. In these years, the organization developed a widely circulated newspaper, had highly publicized showdowns with the police, fought a host of government charges against its members, and built community programs all over the country that offered free food and medical care or fought for the needs of local residents. Although a 1971 split between two major factions destroyed the Party's national prominence, the remaining core of Black Panthers continued their activist work until 1982 (Joseph 299).

My work will focus on the era before the split, when the Black Panther Party generated an impressive set of cultural signifiers. In addition to their evocative uniforms and colorful newspaper, they produced hagiographic posters of Huey Newton, displayed flags and buttons that depicted pouncing panthers; and delivered dramatic public statements to the media. Their masculine bravado and reliance upon the inflammatory terminology of "fascists," "pigs," and "enemies of the people" catapulted them onto the public stage and into the national imaginary. This complex set of visual, aural, and written signifiers was the enormous, unwieldy Panther "aesthetic."<sup>10</sup>

### **Re-Thinking Factional Fights: The Black Panthers *in* the Black Arts Movement?**

This political aesthetic emerged at the same time as the literary development of the Black Arts Movement. Black writers and visual artists were inspired by the activism of the 1960s, and they hoped to make their work politically relevant. If the Black Panthers made activism look like art, poets and dramatists like Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Larry Neal, Ed Bullins, and Jimmy Garrett were attempting to transform art into activism. In his text *The Black Arts Movement*, James Smethurst has already begun the project of breaking down the barriers between "cultural nationalism" and what the Panthers identified as their own "revolutionary nationalism." He reminds us, for instance,

that W.E.B. DuBois and Paul Robeson did not privilege their cultural or their political status but integrated the two forms in their work and public personae. Similarly, Black Arts writers were influenced by the political traditions of Marxism, Black Nationalism, the Nation of Islam, and the civil rights movement, and many of them worked directly as activists. While Smethurst has identified the political inspirations and connections that fed the Black Arts Movement, my study will undertake the converse in its attempts to “read” the Panthers from a literary perspective. In this section, I will outline three ways that the Panthers intertwined themselves with the Black Arts Movement. First, despite interpersonal and organizational strife, they developed concrete connections between artists and activists. Second, The Black Panthers engaged with the same set of “primitive” metaphors that guided much Black Arts Movement work. Third, they used the growth of radical art as a way of guarding themselves against any legal culpabilities associated with their violent rhetoric.

When Larry Neal famously claimed that the BAM was the “aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept,” he glossed over the strained relationships that divided black nationalist artists from some activists, especially the Panthers (Neal 272). Although the groups had initially been close, personal and political differences soon drove them apart. In 1967, San Francisco’s artists and Panther activists had shared living space in a collective known as Black House and had joined forces for local events. A May 1967 conference at Oakland’s Merritt College on the “Black Experience,” for instance, combined art and politics when it featured a lecture by Huey Newton, poetry readings by Sonia Sanchez, LeRoi Jones (the future Amiri Baraka), Marvin Jackmon, and Ed Bullins, and a performance of Jones’s play *A Black Mass* (Bay Area Black Panther Party

Collection, Box 1, folder 26). Such interactions were short-lived, however. According to Baraka, who used Black House as a rehearsal space during his brief tenure as a visiting professor at San Francisco State College, Eldridge Cleaver and his Panther comrades soon ousted artists from the building, deeming them counter-revolutionary cultural nationalists (*Autobiography* 351-60). Later, disputes between Maulana Karenga's<sup>11</sup> cultural nationalist US Organization<sup>12</sup> and the Panthers would culminate in a 1969 encounter that left several Panthers dead. Although the release of federal documents years later indicated that the FBI had promoted the conflict and perhaps even been responsible for the violence, tensions never eased between the two groups (Churchill and Vander Wall, *COINTELPRO Papers* 130-35; Swearingen 82-83).<sup>13</sup> Perhaps because of the severity of this conflict, Panthers developed a negative view of cultural nationalism in general. *The Black Panther* newspaper frequently denounced US, Karenga, and Amiri Baraka (who was associated with US until 1970) as "pork chop nationalists," accusing them of a focus on black culture at the expense of action even as they linked them to the metaphor of the police "pig" (Baraka, *Autobiography* 404; Foner, *The Black Panthers Speak* 50).<sup>14</sup>

Because Baraka was a key figure in Black Arts, his estrangement from the Panthers meant that the BPP associated largely only with black artists who were willing to denounce cultural nationalism in favor of the Panthers' program.<sup>15</sup> The organization promoted its own "revolutionary artist" in cartoonist and illustrator Emory Douglas,<sup>16</sup> and most of the BAM's major players maintained their distance after the split with US. Larry Neal's statement about the close relationship between Black Power politics and the black

aesthetic, then, might have reflected a shared set of beliefs. Real organizational politics, on the other hand, were much more tense—at least when it came to the Panthers.

As scholars continue to define the parameters and themes of the Black Arts Movement, however, they should recognize the disagreements that separated the Panthers from many BAM writers *and* look beyond factional fights to see political and aesthetic continuities. Contemporary black artists have already begun to take this step, as they rarely have qualms about mixing Panther history with Black Arts history. Bruce George, co-founder of *Def Poetry*, is one such example. Although he cites former Black Panther Sam Anderson as the inspiration for his own entry into spoken-word poetry, his show regularly features key Black Arts Movement players like Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubuti and Sonia Sanchez (Stewart 45; Banjoko).<sup>17</sup>

Even taking ideological disagreements into account, there are many reasons to see continuities between the Black Panthers and the Black Arts Movement. If we view Baraka's February 1965 split with the Beat aesthetic and his physical move from Greenwich Village to Harlem as the "founding" date of the BAM, it predated the Panthers by little over a year, and the two movements evolved and died beside one another (Baraka, *Autobiography* 293-95).<sup>18</sup> Their contemporaneous rise and fall, coupled with their shared desire for black power and leftist change, made even adamantly conflicting movements somewhat porous. Before the split between the Panthers and the Us Organization, Bobby Seale performed in plays by Ed Bullins and Marvin X (the former Marvin Jackmon), and Seale felt that Marvin X's work expressed his political perspective (Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement* 170). Before they established the Panthers, Seale was arrested for reciting poems, including Marvin X's "Burn, Baby,

Burn” and Ronald Stone’s “Uncle Sammy Call Me Fulla Lucifer,” as part of an anti-draft event (Seale 27). Even after the organizational tensions developed, antagonisms did not prevent some direct relationships from forming between the two movements. Visual artist Fundi, who collaborated with Baraka on *In Our Terribleness*, contributed a celebratory drawing of Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver to the journal *Black Politics* in 1969 (Bay Area BPP Collection, Box 2, Folder 4). Sonia Sanchez similarly published numerous poems in the *Black Panther*, and Panther artist Emory Douglas returned the favor when he illustrated the cover of her 1969 collection *Home Coming*.<sup>19</sup>

The tension that did exist between the Panthers and their literary cohorts did not prevent the BPP from speaking to and engaging with a black literary history. The organization’s proposed reading list, published regularly in early issues of *The Black Panther*,<sup>20</sup> highlighted political theory and African/African-American history,<sup>21</sup> but it also included Arna Bontemps’s *American Negro Poetry* collection and Wright’s *Native Son*. Bontemps’s collection, published in 1963, grounded Panther readers in the Harlem Renaissance era poetry of Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Helene Johnson; the early work of future BAM artists LeRoi Jones (the future Amiri Baraka) and Mari Evans; and the poetry of an older generation who would ally themselves with Black Arts projects (Dudley Randall, Margaret Walker, Margaret Danner, and Gwendolyn Brooks in addition to Baraka’s fellow Beat poet Ted Joans). Even if the Panthers couldn’t agree with living artists on a personal level, they recognized the role of African-American arts in political and cultural education.

As James Smethurst notes, the BAM reciprocated by insisting on the crucial juncture between art and radical black politics. Participants in the BAM believed that the

construction of black institutions was just as important as the production of African-American art. Artists belonged to and lived in collectives, forged long-lasting organizations, and saw those institutions as both political and artistic endeavors. In these ways, the BAM insisted upon democratizing art and making it part of everyday life. They saw art as a form of *movement*, both physical and political.

Amiri Baraka's 1966 poem "Black Art" expresses exactly this sentiment. Moreover, Baraka elevates political movements and political actors into *forms* of art. The poem has become both a seminal text of the Black Arts Movement and a source of controversy because of its anti-Semitic references and exhortations to violence. Baraka famously writes that "poems are bullshit unless they are / teeth or trees or lemons piled / on a step. Or black ladies dying / of men leaving nickel hearts / beating them down. Fuck poems / and they are useful, they shoot / come at you, love what you are, / breathe like wrestlers, or shudder / strangely after pissing." Most critics have read this poem as a manifesto to politicize aesthetics.<sup>22</sup> I suggest, however, that we see it as a commentary on the way political action creates an aesthetic. The active, political poems within "Black Art" appear as *people*, whether "black ladies," "wrestlers," or "assassins." "Let Black People understand," Baraka says, "that they / [ . . . ] / Are poems & poets & / all the loveliness here in the world" (*The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* 219-20). People, in this text, are not simply artists but poems—they are both pieces of art and the creators of that art. As poems and poets, they must take action to avoid being "bullshit." Here, Baraka offers a new definition of poetry that extends beyond books or broadsides into the liberating actions of black Americans. More importantly, he includes people and political

movements in the category of art, opening the door for Panther aesthetics in the Black Arts Movement.

As Baraka's text suggests, the two elements of politics and aesthetics were fundamentally rather than coincidentally linked. Black Arts work was defined by the fact that it was shouted in the streets, handed out on broadsides, and painted on the walls at the same time that its creators shouted political slogans, handed out political pamphlets, and painted picket signs. Amiri Baraka took his activist role seriously, serving as a leader in national movements such as the Congress of African Peoples [CAP] and the Modern Black Convention Movement. He continues to be a prominent political and artistic figure, as the controversy over his post-9/11 poem "Somebody Blew Up America" indicates (Woodard, *A Nation* 59-84). He was not alone in his political work. To name only two, Sonia Sanchez was a member of the civil rights group CORE [Congress of Racial Equality], and Black Arts playwright Ed Bullins served briefly as the Black Panther Party's Minister of Culture (Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement* 264).

If politics were central to Black Arts, then metaphors, imagery, and carefully constructed rhetoric were equally essential to the Black Panther project. In fact, not only did the Black Panther Party use metaphor to recruit members, but it relied on its marginal relationship with the Black Arts Movement to maintain its public image and to guard against legal culpability for its often violent rhetoric.<sup>23</sup> They did this by tackling the same set of questions about the relationship between art and political action that haunted the work of many Black Arts writers.

Amiri Baraka's *The Slave*, which depicts a black revolutionary who kills his white ex-wife and her husband when they challenge his claim to his children, offers an

illustration of the Black Arts attempt to parse out the relationships between metaphor, action, and personal ethics. First performed in 1964 after Baraka's break with white Greenwich Village bohemians but before his full shift to Black Power, this play is somewhat early for a true "Black Arts" piece, but it initiates themes that emerged in the work of Ed Bullins and Jimmy Garrett in the following years.<sup>24</sup> By presenting characters in ethically difficult situations, writers like Baraka, Bullins, and Garrett confronted the problems of revolutionary violence. As we will see, they often did so more successfully than the Panthers did.

In *The Slave*, Baraka employs the figure of the field slave as a stand-in for the role of metaphor in political action. Baraka's protagonist, Walker Vessels, appears in the play's prologue as a ragged field slave about to tell the story of his revolutionary youth. At the time *The Slave* was written, Malcolm X was motivating audiences by making a distinction between the passive house slave and the rebellious field slave, and the twentieth-century Walker Vessels, an educated man and a poet, adopts the field slave persona when he becomes a black revolutionary. In the post-revolutionary moment of the play's prologue, however, Vessels is still a slave. Although we don't know whether the revolution has succeeded, we do know that Vessels has been unable to escape the slave's role: he is ragged, old, and pessimistic. By taking on the metaphorical position of the field slave, he has locked himself into the status of a slave rather than opening up a space for liberation.

Throughout the rest of the text, which describes Vessels's encounter with his white ex-wife during the revolution, dramatic roles like that of the field slave continue to guide and distort political decisions. Easley, the wife's new husband and a professor of



literature, accuses Vessels of adopting tired metaphors and recycling clichéd dramatic themes. Claiming that Vessels performs “flashy doggerel” and “ritual drama,” Easley insists that “you’re not going to make one of those embrace the weeping ex-wife dramas” (55-56). His ex-wife Grace, in turn, declares that Vessels is “playing the mad scene from *Native Son*,” and she downplays a threatening comment Vessels makes by responding that “he was making a metaphor . . . one of those ritual drama metaphors” (70). By identifying Vessels’s political project as a metaphor, Grace and Easley view him only as a stock figure in a racial drama. They refuse to interpret him as a real political threat or a skilled writer of his own metaphors. Vessels himself seems to do no better. He accepts the roles of Othello and the field slave and loses himself in those characters, killing his ex-wife and Easley before appearing as the decrepit field slave in the play’s prologue.

Here, Baraka highlights the problems of using racialized stereotypes as political tropes. As Vessels comments in the prologue, “I am much older than I look...or maybe much younger. Whatever I am or seem...to you, then let that rest. But figure, still, that you might not be right. Figure, still, that you might be lying...to save yourself. Or myself’s image” (44). The character presents himself as the metaphor of the field slave rather than an actual person. When he says “I am much older than I look...or maybe much younger,” he suggests that the figure of the field slave survives and evolves over time. Is the field slave, he wonders, a product of the nineteenth century or of the 1960s? The character morphs in the hands of those who invoke it: “whatever I am or seem...to you, then let that rest.” But the metaphor also overwhelms those who attempt to use it: “you might be lying...to save yourself. Or myself’s image.” Vessels suggests that those who employ the metaphor of the rebellious field slave become so committed to the image

that they become lost in it. In other words, Vessels states that the reader may be lying about personal or political realities in order to save his own image of the revolutionary field slave. As this passage indicates, the characters' obsession with metaphors rather than real relationships ultimately determines the concrete—and tragic—consequences of revolution on an inter-racial family. Only a political *metaphor* is left at the end: the field slave rather than Vessels himself.

Baraka and his fellow Black Arts dramatists clearly had some misgivings about the transition between violent metaphors and political action. The Panthers, on the other hand, saw the hazy line between action and art as a tool. Baraka's Grace assumed that she was safe because Vessels was only "making a metaphor" when he threatened to kill her, and the Black Panthers capitalized on exactly the same confusion as they attempted to evade government prosecution. When the U.S. House's Committee on Internal Security investigated the Kansas City Chapter of the Panthers in 1970, for instance, attorneys and witnesses attempted to parse out the meanings of Panther expressions. In his examination of Kansas City pastor Phillip Lawson, counsel for the Committee Donald G. Sanders devoted several questions to the phrase "off the pigs:"

Mr. Lawson. [The term] is symbolic of the desire of young people in the black community and young adults in other communities to remove from the community those kinds of law enforcement officers who are brutalizing the people, so 'off' is within that context. Shouting 'off the pig,' as I understand it, is to get off, to get away, to leave.

Mr. Sanders. You have worked in the black community a number of years. We have had a number of witnesses before this committee in previous hearings who have testified that 'off the pig' means 'kill the cops' or in perhaps one larger context, 'kill any officer of the Establishment.' Is this not your understanding of the meaning of that term?

Mr. Lawson. It is not my understanding of the meaning of that term. 'Off the pigs' is a symbolic kind of a chant, like 'right on' has a symbolic kind of meaning in our society, 'so be it.' It is not necessarily saying that everyone who says 'off the

pigs' is going to go out and start killing somebody. (United States, *Black Panther Party, Part One* 2637)

In this case, the witness and the lawyers analyzed tropes in an attempt to determine whether the Panthers participated in illegal activities. Lawson took advantage of the cultural uncertainty of the phrase “to off” as he defended the Panthers. The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates its first example of “to off” meaning “to kill” to Piri Thomas’s 1967 *These Mean Streets*. The term’s use among the general public almost certainly preceded this, but the sense of “to off” meaning “to remove” had a much longer history, dating as early as 1826. In this case, Lawson relied upon the more established meaning of “to off,” and, in doing so, he opened the Congressional hearings to literary and cultural analyses of Panther terminology.

Lawson’s semantics were central to the Panthers’ project. Panther cartoons regularly depicted revolutionaries killing police officers, and the phrase “off the pig” *was* often construed by Panthers and civilians as a call to attack the police. In some cases, BPP members did just that. Former Panthers Eddie Thibideaux and Masai Hewitt have claimed that Panthers sometimes attacked officers and stole their weapons, and members Elbert “Big Man” Howard and Emory Douglas maintain that the Party’s April 6, 1968 shootout with police began after Panthers ambushed a police cruiser with gunfire on an Oakland street (Austin 91, 166-68; Joseph 228).

The *metaphorical* nature of “off the pigs” took over when the Panthers faced legal challenges. For example, the Panthers insisted that Huey Newton had *not* fired any shots during the infamous encounter between him and two Oakland policemen that left Officer John Frey dead in October 1967 (Austin 86). The “Free Huey” campaign, which coincided with Newton’s imprisonment and trial, relied on the notion of police

aggression and Panther victimization. The officers, Panthers implied, had shot one another in their eagerness to kill Newton. In Panther autobiographies like Newton's or Assata Shakur's, moments of Panther-police confrontation and, in Shakur's case, escape from prison, remain shrouded in unconsciousness or authorial silence. After witnessing an officer shoot him, Newton says that "there were some shots, a rapid volley, but I have no idea where they came from. They seemed to be all around me" (171). Somewhere in this haze of shots, Frey is killed. Shakur describes an encounter with police that leaves Panther Zayd Shakur and New Jersey State Trooper Werner Foerster dead in a similar manner (Sullivan 89):

There were lights and sirens. Zayd was dead. My mind knew that Zayd was dead. The air was like cold glass. Huge bubbles rose and burst. Each one felt like an explosion in my chest. My mouth tasted like blood and dirt. The car spun around me and then something like sleep overtook me. In the background i could hear what sounded like gunfire. But i was fading and dreaming. (Assata Shakur 3)

Police bullets did severely wound both Shakur and Newton in these battles, so their vague memories may be the result of physical injury. But the absence of more specific information about their confrontations, combined with Shakur's and Newton's insistence that readers believe in their innocence, asks readers to accept on faith that "off the pigs" is simply a metaphor.

Because Black Arts writers *were* producing similarly violent tropes at this time, the Panthers could plausibly claim innocence by taking refuge in metaphor. The tension between the possible meanings of "off the pigs," however, led to internal strife for the Black Panther Party. In 1971, when Eldridge Cleaver and his faction split from the organization, they did so over this question (Joseph 265). While Cleaver argued that the Panthers should adopt revolutionary guerrilla warfare within the United States, Newton

preferred to focus on “survival programs” such as free breakfast, free medical care, and free groceries for poor black families. He wanted “off the pigs” to remain figurative, and the split was based on a difference in both political and artistic interpretations.

### **Black Arts Primitivism**

This ambiguity between art and action allowed the Panthers to manipulate Black Arts work for its own political purposes. The question also reflected the common set of intellectual concerns and metaphorical structures that the Black Arts Movement and the Black Panthers shared. As the rest of this chapter will illustrate, both movements had a particular interest in tropes of the primitive and the industrial that have long been part of the African-American literary tradition. Although this section will outline some examples of Black Arts engagement with these metaphors, I will devote the rest of the chapter to an extensive reading of the “primitive” and the “industrial” in Panther texts.

In the afterword to the BAM anthology *Black Fire*, editor Larry Neal claims that “we have not been talking about a return to some glorious African past” (639). Nonetheless, magic, spears, and African warriors appear in celebratory passages throughout this text and its Black Arts cohorts. In his 1968 poem “The Primitive,” Haki Madhubuti renounces the industrial world’s “T.V. & straight hair / [ . . . ] / reefers and napalm” for “the shores of Mother Africa” that he envisions filled with “our happiness, our love, each other?” (Madhubuti 26); Amiri Baraka and Fundi Abernathy’s book-length poem and collection of accompanying photos, *In Our Terribleness*, refers to the black photographic subjects as “the magic people” and intones: “Do not despair Ancient People / We are your children / and We have conquered” (60, 66); Lethonia Gee’s “Black Music Man” compares “the epitome of man / BLACK MUSIC MAN” to “a Masai warrior /

With his Burning Spear / Blessed by the Gods” (Jones and Neal 222); Lebert Bethune’s “Harlem Freeze Frame” depicts an “old sweet-daddy” on 116<sup>th</sup> and Lenox as a “gaudy warrior / spear planted, patient eyes searching the veldt” (Jones and Neal 382); and Norman Jordan’s poem “Black Warrior” declares that “the heat of a / thousand African fires / burns across my chest / / I hear the beat / of a war drum / dancing from a distant / land / dancing across a mighty / water / telling me to strike” (Jones and Neal 389).

All of these artists revel in primitivist metaphors as part of African-American identity, but they are also troubled by the encounter with the American industrial world. The question mark at the end of Madhubuti’s “our happiness, our love, each other?” leaves the “primitive” utopia in doubt, and Fundi’s photography for Baraka’s *In Our Terribleness* depicts the author’s “magic people” inhabiting the economically depressed streets of Chicago. Jordan’s poem likewise ends with the speaker breaking an urban shop window with a rock, while Lethonia Gee presents herself as a disenfranchised woman walking America’s streets, unacknowledged by her “warrior.” Bethune’s “primitive” Africa, on the other hand, emerges from the timeless warrior representation with his use of the Afrikaans word “veldt” to describe a specifically southern African field. The African veldt is marked by a history of white colonialism, and many in the Black Power movement, including the Panthers, would argue that 116<sup>th</sup> and Lenox, too, reflects a white colonial history.

As these brief examples demonstrate, the Black Arts Movement toyed with the interaction between American urban life, metaphors of an abstract, timeless Africa, and the realities of contemporary, politically turbulent Africa. The Panthers wrestled with the same sets of images, and for them the connection between Third World<sup>25</sup> colonialism and

the black American ghetto was particularly important. They identified with the colonized “primitive” because of both an imagined African heritage and a shared sense of economic exploitation. Their publications, images, and actions brought explicit political analyses to the aesthetics that circulated both in their own texts and in BAM poetry and drama.

### **Pink Panther meets Black: The Panther and Sixties Culture**

The Panthers’ first and most obvious engagement with the “primitive” was the panther itself. While the notion of using and reversing derogatory terms is not new, the panther does not have the pejorative force of controversially “reclaimed” terms like “nigger,” “fag,” or “dyke.” The panther reflects stereotypes of African-Americans as exotic animals, but its primitivist implications are relatively subtle. Consequently, although the BPP’s adoption of the panther as a mascot captured public imagination, media attention, and frequent commentary from scholars, rarely did such observations refer to the panther as a figure with a history in primitivist racism. We could argue that the Panthers capitalized on ingrained racial associations of exoticism to gain public appeal. In doing so, perhaps they successfully neutralized the stereotype and made the panther a symbol of black power rather than racism. On the other hand, perhaps the panther figure simply reinforced racial stereotypes, mistaking racist exoticism for a source of power. I maintain that these interpretations work simultaneously in Panther imagery, and that as a result, the BPP complicated public understanding of racialized stereotypes even if it didn’t destroy them.

Animals such as panthers, elephants, monkeys, and tigers have historically been invoked in racist associations between African-Americans or Africans and animals native to Africa. The panther functions as an especially interesting case of racial imagery

because the animal is simultaneously African, American, and frequently identified by a relationship to blackness. From a zoological perspective, there is no one animal described by the term “panther.” The term can be applied to African or Asian leopards, North American cougars, or South American jaguars. It can describe spotted, tawny, white, or black animals. While spotted and tawny animals frequently go by their other names, however, large black felines are nearly always given the label “black panther,” though they are simply melanistic varieties of leopard or jaguar. The North American cougar (also known as a puma) does not occur in the melanistic form, meaning that there is no such thing as a “black panther” in the United States, despite frequent rumors of “black panther” sightings.

In many cases, then, the appellation “panther” accompanies the animal’s black coloring, not its species, mimicking human definitions of race by privileging color as a fundamentally defining characteristic even in the absence of genetic difference. For Americans, the panther may be a domestic animal, but the “black panther” is exotic and even mythic. The panther also accommodates numerous forms of stereotyping. Because these large felines, unlike lions, exhibit no readily visible distinctions between male and female, the panther adapts easily to stereotypes of both feminine “cattiness” and black male virility, and these were the two panthers that served as Josephine Baker’s mascots—the virile, masculine panther that accompanied her onstage and the exotic, feminine, panther that she represented to her audience.

By October 1966, when Huey Newton and Bobby Seale formed the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California, forty years and a continent away from Josephine Baker’s Paris, the panther had marched through a variety of cultural meanings, from Nazi Panther



tanks and the US Navy's F9F Panther airplane of the Korean War to the Pink Panther movie and cartoons (Seale 62). The attachment of the panther to planes and tanks reflects an association with strength, masculinity, and virility (and perhaps even race), but the Pink Panther cartoon figure introduced the panther as a wily, intelligent villain. This Panther originally appeared in a short animation titled *The Pink Phink* that ran before the 1964 *The Pink Panther* movie (a detective movie about a "pink panther" diamond that included no actual panthers). In this first episode, the cartoon panther's color dominates the story line as the blundering human hero attempts to paint his house blue while the panther repeatedly tricks him into painting it pink. In this comic color war, the panther emerges as both effeminate in his obsession with pink and an image of masculine hip, accompanied by jazzy music and smoking a cigarette as he saunters through the frame. The emphasis on color and color wars in 1964 America allows race to lurk in the background. The paper-white hero finds that, no matter what he does to protect his work, the Pink Panther succeeds in painting the world his own color.

Perhaps Seale and Newton had the Pink Panther's sly, hip, likable version of a "color war" in mind when they turned to the Panther just two years later. Between 1964 and 1966, however, three much more explicitly racialized versions of the panther made their way into pop culture, and the Panthers built their political metaphor at the juncture of all these images. The first, in 1965, was the release of Alex Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* with an introduction by M.S. Handler. In an attempt to frame the text's subject, Handler describes his wife's first meeting with Malcolm X: "You know," she remarks, "it was like having tea with a black panther." Handler expands on her metaphor: "The description startled me. The black panther is an aristocrat in the

animal kingdom. He is beautiful. He is dangerous. As a man, Malcolm X had the physical bearing and the inner self-confidence of a born aristocrat. And he was potentially dangerous” (ix). Handler invokes the traditional metaphor of black primitivism: X was dangerous but beautiful and exotic. As a white liberal supporter of civil rights, Handler acts as the second mediator (after writer Alex Haley) between readers and Malcolm X, and his description of X presents the famous figure as appealing precisely because he was half-“tamed”—a genial guest for tea who remains a threat to the liberal civil rights project. As admirers and readers of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* who rejected the liberal dream of integration into capitalist society, Newton and Seale would soon speak back to Handler’s introduction in a way that the already-martyred X could not.

A similar use of the panther would debut just months later, in July of 1966, in the form of Marvel’s Black Panther, a villain turned superhero in the *Fantastic Four* comic series (Ture 106; S. Lee, et al). Although the comic book appeared in the wake of the Watts riots and the assassination of Malcolm X, Marvel’s Black Panther is a traditional African caricature. He inhabits the mythical African village of Wakanda, where tribal villagers wear “togas” and garments resembling ancient Egyptian kilts, and he evolves from foe to friend of the Fantastic Four as he seeks to avenge the death of his father, tribal chief T’Chaka (S. Lee, et al). Amidst Marvel’s often nationalist and anti-communist metaphors, the Black Panther superhero echoes basic stereotypes while reflecting the combination of urban unrest and primitivist imagery that was surfacing in radical communities at the time. Marvel’s Black Panther is as much an urban figure as a tribal one, and the Fantastic Four first encounter him in a technological manner when the Panther’s assistant offers the heroes a high-tech flying machine to transport them to

Africa. When they arrive, they find themselves not in a tropical jungle but in an “industrial jungle” of sophisticated electronic equipment: “The very branches about us are composed of delicately constructed wires . . . while the flowers which abound here are highly complex buttons and dials!” (#52: 9).<sup>26</sup>

The Black Panther’s technological sophistication aimed to reverse the link between the “primitive” and technological underdevelopment, for Marvel envisioned the Black Panther as an improvement in racial representations even as it propagated stereotypes of blackness. Only a month later, *Star Trek* would repeat this project of “deconstructing” black stereotypes with technological representations when it presented Nichelle Nichols as the Starship Enterprise’s Lieutenant Uhura.<sup>27</sup> While *Star Trek*’s adaptation of the Swahili word for freedom, *uhuru* (a term that had become a part of the black activist lexicon by 1966) referenced the growing black cultural nationalist movement directly, the *Fantastic Four* simply overlaid metaphors of urban, technological, and industrial life over a “primitive” African landscape.<sup>28</sup>

In a year that saw the civil rights movement shift from its base in the south to the urban north, the comic book’s confusion of the African with the African-American and the industrial with the primitive conveyed white fear about black Americans claiming urban spaces of power.<sup>29</sup> The Black Panther emerged in the first episode as a villain, and the industrial jungle held traps for the white heroes and their Native American sidekick. The combination of primitive culture and industrial know-how, in other words, was the Black Panther’s most threatening trait. The text contains the threat when the Fantastic Four are saved by Native American ally Wyatt Wingfoot, whose simple “primitive” skills overcome the Black Panther’s industrial know-how. This construction of racial relations

that valorized a non-threatening version of the “primitive”—in this case a Native American—would meet its match several years later when not only the BPP but the American Indian Movement, the Young Lords (a group of Puerto Rican nationalists), the Chicano movement, and a host of others would simultaneously challenge white America.

### **The Political Panther and the Black Power Movement**

Newton and Seale’s adoption of uniforms and their combination of urban and primitivist imagery certainly mimicked the “superhero” and “supervillain” personas that Marvel propagated. We can, also, however, read the Black Panther Party’s mascot as an emerging trend in the Black Power movement. Yet another black panther, which preceded the Marvel character by more than a year, appeared as the logo of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization [LCFO] in 1965. This timing is crucial because I do not mean to suggest that either Lowndes or the BPP directly imitated Marvel. In fact, Marvel may have consciously imitated the LCFO. In March 1965, activists in Lowndes County, Alabama began the organization as an independent political party. Because Lowndes was a majority-black county, activists reasoned, the black community should be able to claim political power democratically if it could overcome white violence and intimidation (Austin; Joseph). Only two black voters were registered in the entire county as of 1965, but by May 1966, the organization had earned a place on the ballot for the local November elections, and it would appear under the symbol of a black panther (Joseph 127-30).

The origin of the mascot remains uncertain. Historian Jeffrey Ogbar cites three different stories that he elicited in conversations with former activists. In the first response:

Willie Mukasa Ricks recalled that when SNCC members who formed the LCFO met and searched for a mascot, [. . .] someone pointed at Mrs. Moore, of Lowndes County, remarking that she appeared strong and powerful like a panther. ‘That’s it,’ they remarked ‘We will be strong and powerful like Mrs. Moore—a black panther.’ Identification with the people was an intrinsic part of SNCC organization by 1965. That a peasant woman, Mrs. Moore, had risen against white supremacy and its many manifestations to organize politically was in and of itself a powerful act of defiance and strength. (*Black Power* 76)

In this story, the panther is linked to a woman, to “the people,” and to “peasants,” suggesting that the SNCC organizers, who were by then national political players, sought a connection to an “essential” black community, and the panther trope offered just such a connection. Mrs. Moore was strong like a black panther not because she had resisted but because she was a “*peasant woman*” who had stepped outside of her social status to resist. Moreover, here the panther retains both its feminine and its virile qualities, living up, if in a less overt way, to Josephine Baker’s panther image.

The second and third origin stories associate the panther in a generic way with “toughness.” SNCC member Ruth Howard Chambers links the insignia to Clark College’s panther mascot, while James Forman claims that the panther was chosen as a strong native animal of Alabama. Tawny colored “panthers,” also known as mountain lions, cougars, or pumas, were historically native to Alabama, but black panthers existed only in local myth. Consequently, we could read these two histories of the panther mascot as either repetitions of the racialized panther or as simple expressions of power and local pride. The exotic nature of the mythical local black panther, however, and the importance of racial and cultural “otherness” to sports mascots (through Native American figures as well as Vikings, Fighting Irish, etc) suggests that racial connotations lurk even in apparently generic uses of the panther.

In fact, the enthusiasm of the white-dominated media for LCFO's panther mascot indicates that the name sparked associations beyond "toughness." Stokely Carmichael, who worked to organize the LCFO, expressed frustration with the panther's primitivist connotations in a June 1966 encounter with the press on CBS's *Face the Nation*. When Boston Globe reporter James Dole referred to the LCFO as the "Black Panther Party," Carmichael responded:<sup>30</sup>

Let me say that the name of the organization in Lowndes County is not the Black Panther Party. The symbol happens to be a black panther. The name is the Lowndes County Freedom Organization. I am very concerned about that, you see, because Americans—particularly white America—have been referring to it as the Black Panther Party, and that is their problem with sex and color. They do not refer to the Alabama Democratic Party as the White Rooster Party, and that happens to be the emblem of that party. (CBS News 160-1)

Carmichael directly acknowledges the racial and eroticized connotations of the panther mascot, and he registers his discomfort with such associations. Few took heed of Carmichael's point, however, whether in the mass media, the radical community, or the black community. The Young Socialist Alliance [YSA], a youth group affiliated with the Socialist Workers Party, became a vocal supporter of what it referred to as the Black Panther Party, publishing a celebratory 1966 pamphlet on the organization that included a statement by a YSA member, an interview with Carmichael, and a speech by LCFO member John Hulett. Throughout the text, the authors and publisher refer to the LCFO *solely* as the Black Panther Party despite the fact that Carmichael and John Hulett never use this name (*The Black Panther Party*). Similarly, African Americans around the country began to embrace the panther symbol as a promising organizing tool. In the year *between* the LCFO's appearance and the founding of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in October 1966, Black Panther Parties emerged in New York City, Los

Angeles, San Francisco, Oakland, Detroit, Chicago, and St. Louis, suggesting that there was something about the panther *name* that had particular currency in 1966 (Austin 15).<sup>31</sup> While Seale and fellow Panthers' armed entry into the California state legislature is often cited as the spark that drove the organization's popularity, the metaphor of the panther was also a major mobilizing factor.

When Seale and Newton finally formed their own Black Panther Party, they did not list the entire array of panther references that I have cited. Instead, they traced the name's origin solely to the LCFO (Newton with Blake 113). They even adopted the exact same drawing of a leaping panther that the LCFO had used on its promotional material.<sup>32</sup> Although Seale and Newton allowed the panther to resonate with Marvel and Handler's panthers or the Pink Panther, they insisted on a simple radical trajectory that avoided the complications of small political disagreements associated with the array of other Black Panther Parties. They envisioned themselves as the direct descendants of the new Black Power movement in the South and as inheritors rather than creators of the panther insignia. As a result, Seale and Newton could declare that the panther grew out of black radicalism rather than a history of racism.

The Panthers also replaced racist notions of the panther with layers of signification that reflected their ideological commitments. Most racialized animal metaphors attribute animal traits to their human counterparts, but the BPP used its animal mascot to embody ideology rather than essential characteristics. According to organizational lore, the literal panther did not initiate violence—it responded fiercely only when attacked (Newton with Blake 120). This supposed panther quality acted as an ideological tool to control group behavior and public perceptions. This type of restrained

aggression was not an innate feature of black people, the Panthers insisted, but a desired quality of politically educated and physically disciplined Black Panther cadre.

Aware that comparisons between humans and animals were racially charged, the Panthers also widened their animal imagery beyond the panther to challenge standard racial categorizations. *The Black Panther* newspaper, then, depicts the panther only as an animal, without human characteristics, while portraying defenders of the state apparatus as humanoid animals. Police officers, judges, and a personified US empire appear in *The Black Panther* cartoons and articles as grotesque pigs and rats while Black Panther men and women look fully human (individual Party members are often recognizable). In response to white culture's association between "exotic" animals and African-American people, the Panthers saddled whites with notoriously filthy domestic animals. The panther could be pulled out of its mire of racialization and reclaimed, they suggested—the pig would be much more difficult to rehabilitate.<sup>33</sup>

The BPP could not erase the panther's racialized history, however, simply by inserting radical commentary in its place. When James Doyle referred to LCFO as a "black panther party," he touched upon the panther's power to capture both white and black imaginations, and the BPP capitalized on this phenomenon. Primitivist images are powerful because they engage romantic notions of racialized power, allowing stereotypes to portray an oppressed group as more vibrant and powerful than the oppressors. African Americans who flocked to the Panthers or to cultural nationalist organizations that embraced Afrocentrism were interested *both* in political liberation from a racist, capitalist system *and* in confronting the metaphors of race that continued to lurk in their racist culture. Frantz Fanon describes this heightened consciousness of racial constructions as



“exist[ing] triply”: “I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism [sic], racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: ‘Sho good eatin’” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 112). Here, Fanon argues that racialized cultural markers damage his sense of self. Nevertheless, he also claims some primitivist constructions as productive understandings of blackness. While he argues that “one had to distrust rhythm, earth-mother love, this mystic, carnal marriage of the group and the cosmos,” he lays claim to romantic notions of blackness when he echoes Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and insists that “I feel in myself a soul as immense as the world, truly a soul as deep as the deepest of rivers” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 125, 140). Fanon’s desires and warnings about racializing nationalism (which he expressed again in *The Wretched of the Earth*) certainly reached Black Panther ears, as the organization revered him and required all junior Panthers to read his works in political education classes.<sup>34</sup> Fanon motivated the Panthers to recognize primitivism as romantic exoticism even as they celebrated its emotional and self-motivating power.

The Black Panther Party could not eliminate the primitivist panther’s connotations, then, but it could make use of them. Because the panther already had racial currency within mainstream society, the trope attracted media attention and public interest in a way that a political program could not. It appealed to existing American understandings of race, and only after drawing their attention did it begin to challenge those notions.<sup>35</sup> With national eyes on them, the Panthers had the opportunity to narrate their image with political actions and theory. In some ways, this process was extremely

successful. The organization drew recruits with its name, guns, and uniforms, and once they were admitted, a rigid Party structure educated new members about black history, literature, and revolutionary politics. The Black Panther political project aimed to re-write the panther trope with members who would defend the community, articulate anti-racist and anti-capitalist positions, and eventually foment revolution.

Even as the organization drew support and recruits from the black community and the white left, however, the panther permitted the mainstream news media to depict panther images and metaphors in place of Panther politics. Edward P. Morgan's study of the Panthers in mass media sources demonstrates that *Time* and *Newsweek* still employed the panther as a racialized animal signifier. Between 1968 and 1976, the two newsmagazines used terms like "Panther Hunt," "snarling," "pack," "pounce," "pussycat," "purring," and "Tame Panthers" to describe the Black Panther Party.<sup>36</sup> If the panther image earned the Black Panther Party coverage in national newsmagazines, its use in these cases escaped the BPP's control.

### **Panther Chic as Literary Form: *The Black Panther* Newspaper**

On the pages of its own newspaper, *The Black Panther*, the organization *did* control rhetorical and visual choices. While the panther mascot on its own relied on limited visual associations between politics and the "primitive," the newspaper embedded the panther trope within a Marxian analysis of post-industrial urban America. The leaping panther adorned the group's buttons and flags, but elsewhere in the newspaper the animal mascot receded in favor of human representations of the black community. In *The Black Panther*, then, the urban neighborhood of the north became the site for interactions between human Panthers, pigs, and rats. The metaphorical setting was a contradictory

mix of the jungle, the barnyard, and the urban streets. For urban black Americans in the north, many of whom had roots in the rural south and all of whom had been affected by racist metaphors of the jungle, this combination was not as strange as it first appears. Mixed metaphors of urban industrialism and rural American/African primitivism located American racial conflict in physical places: the rural South, the urban North, and the colonial Third World.<sup>37</sup> The newspaper positioned racialized tropes in geographical places and posited those locales as points of resistance.

*The Black Panther* newspaper, which began publication in April 1967, offers a glimpse into the Panthers' carefully constructed relationship between imagery, rhetoric, and ideology. The group published its original issue in response to an incident of police brutality in North Richmond, California. Denzil Dowell, an unarmed black man, was shot ten times by police as they pursued him on suspicion of stealing a car. Officers abandoned the wounded Dowell, who was found dead by family hours later, and the shooters were swiftly exonerated by a grand jury (Austin xii, 77). Angry and frustrated, Dowell's parents consulted the Panthers, who had attracted attention locally for their police patrols. The youth's case quickly became a focal point for the BPP in its project against police brutality. As the organization rallied support for Dowell's family in public demonstrations, the Panthers decided that a newspaper would be a useful publicity tool (Seale 147).

The first issues addressed solely the Dowell case, but in the following years, *The Black Panther* evolved into a weekly that became a central focus of Panther life. The group put substantial resources into publishing and distributing the paper, allowing many of its most talented recruits, such as Eldridge Cleaver and Emory Douglas, to spend their

time writing, editing, and illustrating it. The Panther rank-and-file also put in the greater part of their days selling the paper on the streets, retaining a small commission (ten cents) for themselves and turning the rest over to the Party (Seale 179).<sup>38</sup> The BPP was extraordinarily successful in this project, as *The Black Panther* soon trailed only the Nation of Islam's *Muhammad Speaks* in national distribution numbers for African-American newspapers (Ogbar, *Black Power* 121). Even though the FBI sought to hinder the newspaper's delivery by interfering with shipping routes, a phone call recorded by the FBI in March 1969 indicates a printing of 40,000, and former newspaper editor JoNina Abron reports that the weekly distribution was as high as 125,000 in 1970 (*Muhammad Speaks* still dwarfed *The Black Panther* with a print run of 600,000) (Seale 180; Huey P. Newton Collection Series 4, Box 1, Folder 5; Abron 182; Ogbar, *Black Power* 121; Clegg 160).<sup>39</sup>

As membership spread into chapters across the country, the newspaper aimed to consolidate political ideology nationally and to create a sense of solidarity among branches. *The Black Panther* was also used, however, to exert control over the branches and to publicly expel or denounce members. Hostility between Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver grew in 1970 and 1971, and the New York branch (which was loyal to Cleaver) found that its articles would no longer be published by Newton loyalists at the national office (Austin 299). Assata Shakur, a member of the New York branch during the split, remembers learning not from headquarters but from *The Black Panther* that her friends Dhoruba bin Wahad, Cetawayo Tabor, and Connie Matthews Tabor had been deemed traitors to the Party (Assata Shakur 232). The newspaper, then, was both a

vehicle for Panther writers across the country and a weapon to silence organizational disagreements.

The publication itself was printed in newspaper-style format, including photos, cartoons, poetry, suggested reading lists, and syndicated news articles from the radical Liberation News Service in addition to reports on Party activity in the branches and ideological tracts written by leaders like Newton and Cleaver. While denunciations of expelled members did appear fairly regularly, the newspaper focused largely on the political needs of BPP members and oppressed communities around the world. It recorded labor disputes, living conditions, and imprisonment, identifying Panther martyrs and community victims of police brutality as well as “pigs” and “traitors.” International stories about the war in Vietnam included shocking depictions of carnage such as a photograph of American soldiers proudly displaying a severed head and another of a Vietnamese boy shot in the head, his brains spilling onto the ground (*The Black Panther* 17 Feb. 1970; 19 May 1970).<sup>40</sup> When members like Newton, Seale, or the New York 21 were imprisoned, *The Black Panther* reprinted appeals, legal complaints and trial summaries. Reports of Panther Survival Programs such as the Free Breakfast for Children Program and articles on unjust housing situations or police brutality stressed the Panthers’ desire to use the newspaper as a direct connection to local communities, and international news stories about Communist Party activity in Vietnam and China or strikes in Mexico put these injustices into a global perspective.

Nearly every issue also reprinted at least several items from a stock list: the Party’s “Ten-Point Platform,” its organizational rules, calls for workers and/or contributions, and “A Pocket Lawyer of Legal First Aid.” These standard inclusions,

usually tucked away in the last pages of the issue, were supplemented by another series of repetitions: images, cartoons, illustrations, and even entire articles appeared frequently as *Black Panther* reprints. Thus, although the newspaper informed readers of current news stories, it also acted out a kind of discursive ritual for readers that affirmed their identification with the Panthers and their dissociation from the “pigs.” In particular, four themes and images helped to structure Panther style as a negotiation between primitive metaphors and an urban, industrial location: one, oft-repeated photos of Huey Newton in two poses—standing with a gun and ammunition strap and seated in a rattan chair; two, recurring drawings of Bobby Seale bound to a courtroom chair and an electric chair; three, photographic representations of the black urban ghetto, especially dilapidated housing; and four, Marxian analyses of capitalism that established a relationship between the “lumpenproletariat” and the relations of production. To examine how these regular features allowed the Panthers to posit the primitive as a byproduct of the industrial and, consequently, as a key mobilizing force, the following sections will draw on examples from *The Black Panther* between 1968 and 1970. These years marked the height of the organization’s fame and success—both internal and external. By 1971 (and the newspaper reflects evidence of this even earlier), the Party had begun a slow decline as it was plagued with FBI infiltration, internal strife, and decreased recruitment.<sup>41</sup>

## Huey Newton as the Panthers' Primitive Fetish



**Fig. 1. Huey Newton in a photo conceptualized and staged by Eldridge Cleaver**  
Credit: Picture History

The Panthers are perhaps most well-known by two iconic images of Huey Newton. One depicts him in a wide-backed rattan chair, armed with a spear and a rifle (Fig. 1), and the other presents him standing, holding a gun across the bandolier on his chest (Fig. 2). The photograph of Seale and Newton seen in Figure 2 sometimes appeared in its original version, but it was more frequently cropped to exclude Seale. The most commonly repeated photos, then, depict Newton alone, wearing the Panther uniform of

black pants, black beret, and black leather jacket. Both were mass produced as posters and appeared almost obsessively in the *Black Panther* newspaper. Numerous issues between 1968 and 1970 feature one of these photos on the cover, and nearly every copy includes one or both on an inner fold. When a *Black Panther* issue includes an article written by or about Newton, it is sometimes accompanied by an entire array of these images. The January 4, 1969 edition, for instance, prints a vertical row of photos depicting Newton in the rattan chair, each a slightly different take from the same photo shoot, while *The Genius of Huey P. Newton*, a

book of Newton's writings published by the Party in 1970, merges both photos into its cover art (*The Black Panther* 4 Jan 1969: 3).

Through these images, the Panthers embraced white American fears of the fantastical African "primitive" and the communist revolutionary. In both photos, Newton imitates the swagger of the armed guerrilla, and his beret aligns him with the newly minted Cuban revolution. His standing pose asserts both defiant revolutionary



**Fig. 2. Bobby Seale and Huey Newton**  
Credit: AP/Wide World

performance and a self-conscious statement of solidarity with international revolutionary movements—a sentiment that would escalate in the late '60s as antiwar activists from Students for a Democratic Society [SDS] and their splinter organizations took up chants such as "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, the NLF is gonna win." The Panther leather jacket, on the other hand, celebrates black urban culture and identifies Newton as *African-American*. According to Elbert Howard, the Panthers had chosen the black leather jacket as a uniform because "it seemed that everybody had one anyway" (Austin 61). The uniform, then, was designed not to distinguish the Panthers in their community but to mark them as part of it.<sup>42</sup>





**Fig. 3. Marvel's Black Panther in 2003 now resembles Huey Newton's tribal chieftain pose (Issue #58).  
Credit: Marvel Entertainment, Inc.**

The sitting pose, on the other hand, in which Newton surrounds himself with African art objects as he rests his feet upon a zebra-skin rug, could as easily portray Marvel's Black Panther as a radical internationalist. His upright posture and wide-backed chair recall the Black Panther superhero's caricatured position as tribal chieftain, and the juxtaposition of spear and sword mimic the cartoon's "primitive" threat of

hand-to-hand combat complemented by modern technology. In fact, Newton's stance strikingly

resembles Marvel's more recent depictions of the Black Panther (Fig. 4). The masks in the background, the spear in the Black Panther's hand, the "superhero" uniform, and the circular ray of light behind the hero's head all mimic Newton's famous photograph.

While Marvel probably echoed Newton intentionally in an attempt to insert an "authentic" anti-racist politics into today's Black Panther superhero, the missing beret and gun remind the viewer that *this* Black Panther emerges out of the tradition of primitivism and not out of the history of Black Power. The slippage between these two images demonstrates that, like Marvel's illustration, Newton's photograph fails to engage the realities of colonial Africa, instead repeating and adopting Western notions of primitive tribal power.

This photo was staged by Eldridge Cleaver, a Party member who had become famous for his work of cultural criticism *Soul on Ice*, written while he was serving time

for marijuana possession and rape (Austin 71-75). Several months after his 1966 release, Cleaver joined the BPP and quickly became a central figure (Lazerow and Williams 1). In the next four years, he would variously play the roles of Party theorist during Newton's imprisonment, leader of the Party's International Section in Algeria when he fled legal charges in the United States, and head of Newton's opposition during the 1971 split. In the photo that depicts Newton in the stance of a tribal chieftain, Cleaver exhibits his own analysis of racialized, gendered stereotypes. In *Soul on Ice*, Cleaver argues that capitalist society categorizes black men, black women, white men, and white women, respectively, as the "supermasculine menial," the "Amazon," the "omnipotent administrator," and the "superfeminine elite." Through the figures of the hyper-corporeal supermasculine menial and Amazon, Cleaver maintains, white culture desires and consumes black bodies, denying their intellect and stripping them of healthy sexual relations with one another. Although his elaborate discussion of race and sexuality rails against black male homosexuality and stresses the need for black men to treat black women as "Queens," Cleaver also recognizes his own insecurities about black masculinity and insists that his adoption of terms like "Queen" does not reflect the essential "primitive" nature of blackness. He argues, in fact, that the metaphorical "jungle" is a trait of *capitalist* society that it tries to repress. The United States has, he argues, a "*de facto* jungle law underlying our culture" (84).

Newton's "tribal chieftain" pose, then, registers Eldridge Cleaver's understandings of race and cultural symbols. Cleaver and Newton use the photo to reveal racist mythologies of race and to generate their own myth of black resistance to take its place. Newton, sitting on his rattan throne, uncovers the "jungle" beneath American

civilization, and he appears as a political leader rather than the “supermasculine menial.” Nonetheless, on its own, the photo replicates many of the problematic stereotypes that Cleaver identified. Newton is presented as a threatening black body for public consumption.

The Panthers assuaged this problem by re-inserting Newton’s intellect into the image of supermasculine blackness. The image of Newton in the rattan chair might have been obsessively reproduced in *The Black Panther*, but theoretical tracts written by Newton were repeated with almost as much regularity. When the organization coupled the Newton image with Newton’s political theory, it used the photo to highlight racial stereotypes without simply repeating them. In the May 4, 1968 edition of *The Black Panther*, for instance, the editors designed a page that included Newton’s rattan chair pose, a background repeating the phrase “HUEY MUST BE SET FREE!!,” an illustration of a gun and a hammer, and Newton’s essay “In Defense of Self Defense: The Correct Handling of a Revolution.” The first line of the text addresses the page’s visuals by announcing their constructedness: “Most human behavior is learned behavior. [ . . . ] Human beings do not act from instinct as lower animals do” (Newton, “In Defense of Self-Defense” 6-7). Here, Newton emphasizes the disjuncture between Panther activists and the literal panthers that appear on the page. He goes on to bemoan the strategy of urban rebellion and to posit instead a project of urban guerrilla warfare based on underground cadre cells that commit minor acts of revolt while evading escape. In this theoretical essay, Newton links the image of himself in the chair to an intellectual and political strategy rather than an essential notion of the black male body. The threat to the

white public will come, Newton insists, from a coordinated attack by thinking African Americans, not out of the black male's supposed physical impulsivity.<sup>43</sup>

This combination of the Newton image and the leader's political theory generated a fetish of masculine leadership for Panther members and supporters. The Party was still young at the time of the October 1967 encounter that left police officer John Frey dead and Huey Newton on trial for murder, and the burgeoning group of new members who entered the Party during Newton's imprisonment came to know him only through photos and the disembodied words that he sent to his followers in written addresses. During his confinement, the two images of Newton discussed above were reproduced as posters and sold to benefit the cause. At a birthday party held in honor of the imprisoned Newton in 1968, the rattan chair even stood empty at center stage to mark the leader's absence. As Panther Elaine Brown remarked, "Thousands had joined the Black Panther Party while Huey was behind bars. To them he was a mythical figure, a godly photograph of a man, or a man's image of God" (251). She, too, expressed surprise upon meeting Newton that "he had stepped out of his poster and was breathing and eating and exhibiting ordinary attributes" (265).

The organization's reliance on Newton's symbolic, mythical status initially enhanced recruitment efforts and group cohesion. Constantly reprinted as symbols of genius and courage in *The Black Panther*, Newton's image and texts evolved into a Freudian fetish—a psychological compensation for a lack or absence—in a strikingly literal way. Newton himself was missing, imprisoned by the American government. By proposing a fetish as a replacement for a missing person, the Panthers insisted that their fetish was rational rather than neurotic. Because the notion of the fetish itself arose out of

Freud's understanding of "primitive" religious practice, the Panthers symbolically challenged the irrationality of such behavior when they made a fetish of the iconic, primitive, imprisoned Newton. Their "primitive" fetish symbolized real absences in the black community—not only Huey Newton but community safety, good jobs, and affordable food and housing.

As it drew members away from reality into mythology, however, the Newton fetish could not survive its subject's return. When Newton was released in May 1970 after the Court of Appeals overturned his conviction for the voluntary manslaughter of John Frey, his leadership decisions quickly clashed with Cleaver's political perspective, and his real-life persona disappointed many. His awkward public speaking style, his assumption of the title "Supreme Commander," and his living style in a luxury penthouse at the Party's expense all brought him under fire from the rank and file (Joseph 250-61). The core absence behind the fetish was black liberation, and the return of Newton's body to the Black Panther Party was a poor substitute.

Regardless of whether Cleaver and Newton intentionally invoked the fetish as a commentary on Western understandings of the "primitive," they did employ primitivist imagery in response to American racism. On the one hand, when they adopted depictions of an abstract Africa, they propagated stereotypical notions of Africa as a homogenous, timeless space populated by tribal societies. On the other hand, they mingled tropes of America, Africa, and the revolutionary Third World together in order to put Third World solidarity on display. In their newspaper, they published frequent reports on African and other Third World revolutionary struggles, and they established concrete relationships with many of these international movements. In 1970, Eldridge Cleaver fled to Algeria to

escape American legal charges and, with his wife Kathleen, established the International Section of the Black Panther Party. In the Western hemisphere, Cuba served as a stopping point for Cleaver and later Panther fugitives like Assata Shakur (K. Cleaver, “Back to Africa”; Assata Shakur). To build revolutionary connections in Asia, Cleaver headed a 1970 group of black and Asian-American radicals to China, North Korea, and North Vietnam, and he would later arrange with the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam [NLF] to offer an exchange of American war prisoners for Black Panthers in American prisons (K. Cleaver, “Back to Africa” 232-34).

The pseudo-diplomatic connections between the BPP and revolutionary governments around the world re-oriented the Panthers’ primitivist tropes toward specific nations. By combining cartoonist Emory Douglas’s drawings of African women carrying babies and guns with news coverage of anti-colonial liberation and communist revolutionary movements, the BPP specified the abstract tropes of the primitive that they presented in their imagery. In place of a “savagery” ultimately pleasurable to white power, Newton envisioned a primitivist “nightmare” that aligned itself with the communist nightmare of the Vietnam War and the threat of falling dominos that haunted the American imagination. Newton stressed that he was not a passive player in this structure (Lemke 5). As an urban black American, Newton had *chosen* his association with both the “primitive” and the guerrilla revolutionary.

At a time when the political theory of “internal colonialism,” or the notion that America’s racial ghettos were colonies of the American “mother country,” was gaining influence, Newton employed the “primitive” as a theoretical statement in addition to an aesthetic one. The “primitive,” the Panthers implied, was simply a set of metaphors

attached to modern colonized peoples, and by embracing the discourse of the primitive, the Panthers could identify America's urban landscape as a colonized, "primitive" space. The geographical incongruities between the American dress, the African spears, and the Cuban beret asked viewers to build specific rather than generic associations between black Americans and people of color around the world. Newton's combination of black American urban style and Third World revolutionary style acted as a declaration of future solidarity rather than a careful analysis of a shared past.

The Panthers' international contacts and newspaper accounts of Third World revolution did not, however, aim to change the heroic, optimistic, and aggressive elements of Newton's photos. Even if Newton represented a specific coalition of Third World nations rather than simply an abstract "primitive," the image could not account for the complex ethical realities of revolutionary movements around the world. These realities quickly confronted those Panthers who participated in international work. When the Cleavers moved to Algeria, for example, they found that they were initially shunned by the Algerian government. After relying on support from Richard Wright's daughter Julia Wright Hervé in their first months, the Panthers did eventually receive government funding and office space for their work. This did not end the strife, however, and some members, fed up with the corrupt politics of revolutionary Algeria, moved to Nyerere's Tanzania.

Although the Cleavers quickly determined that Algeria was not a socialist paradise, average readers of *The Black Panther* continued to read Algeria through the lens of Newton's celebratory photos of Third World solidarity. On multiple occasions, black Americans unaffiliated with the Panthers responded to Panther rhetoric about

Africa by hijacking planes and ordering them to Algeria, where the hijackers then joined the Party's International Section. (K. Cleaver, "Back to Africa" 217-45). These hijackings suggest that the Panthers were successful in identifying Algeria as a specific site of African/African-American identification. Their identification, however, remained abstract and romantic. Panthers and hijackers alike found a small community of African-American expatriates in Algeria, but they did not find opportunities for the heroic Third World solidarity promised in Newton's famous photo.

### **Newton's Other Half: Gender and the Figure of the Oppressed**

While the BPP portrayed Huey Newton as the ultimate masculine hero figure, it handled images of Bobby Seale differently. At first, while Newton was imprisoned, Seale took a back seat in the Party's imagery while handling the vast majority of its organizational work. It wasn't until 1969, after the October 1968 Democratic National Convention and the 1969 murder of Panther Alex Rackley, that Seale appeared at the center of Party imagery. Between 1969 and 1970, he was tried in two cases: the first as a member of the "Chicago Eight"<sup>44</sup> for conspiracy and inciting to riot at the Chicago Convention and the second for allegedly ordering Rackley's murder as a suspected FBI informer in New Haven, Connecticut.

Bobby Seale's courtroom struggles became a focal point of Black Panther imagery in the first months of 1970. During this time, Seale was in a major battle with Julius Hoffman, the presiding judge of the Chicago Eight trial, over his right to legal representation. Although his seven co-defendants<sup>45</sup> shared the legal counsel of Bill Kunstler, Seale insisted on employing the Panthers' regular lawyer Charles Garry (Seale; Hoffman). But Garry, hospitalized for a gall bladder operation, was unavailable, and the



judge ordered the trial to go on without him (Seale 296). Seale protested his lack of legal representation vocally in the courtroom, and eventually the judge responded by having him gagged and handcuffed to a chair. Court and media artists' renditions of the sole black defendant bound and gagged circulated widely in the activist community and the mass media, and *The Black Panther* adopted both this image and one nearly identical to it as a complementary set of icons to Newton's guerrilla warrior photos. Seale's images were illustrations rather than photos, one signed by B. Jones and the other created by Emory Douglas for the March 15, 1970 cover of *The Black Panther*.<sup>46</sup>

While the courtroom drawing depicted Seale bound to a chair, Douglas rendered the defendant strapped into the electric chair. Unlike Newton, who was the picture of machismo and military leadership despite his imprisonment and eligibility for the death penalty, Seale appeared as an all-too-human figure hopelessly enmeshed in America's racist structure. *The Black Panther* separated Seale's image of oppressed humanity from Newton's portrayal of mythic masculinity. Even in Figure 2, Seale had typically been omitted from the photo to highlight Newton's armed leadership. As the imprisoned Newton spoke in published articles and wielded weapons in accompanying photos, the similarly jailed Seale was portrayed as metaphorically silenced. The two images of him were factual, as they reflected both the real punishment that Judge Hoffman had meted out and the threat of the death penalty that Seale faced in his trial for the death of Rackley. Nonetheless, Seale's experience was interpreted differently than Newton's. Although Newton, too, faced the death penalty for the murder of John Frey, he was depicted in positions of defiant power.

Paired as Seale and Newton were in founding and leading the Party, these doubled sets of images identified them as synecdoches for black Americans in their dual roles as the resistant and the oppressed. Newton took on the part of the hero and Seale that of the politically vulnerable black body. *The Black Panther* needed both images to present its ideological perspective, and despite Newton's dominant position, the Panthers did not simply demean Seale in these depictions. The two bodies were somewhat interchangeable. The Panther uniform presented not only Newton but *any* member as a threat to the police or white America, and it was Seale who led the Party during the BPP's first action at the Sacramento legislature and later when Newton was imprisoned. Although the rattan throne that stood empty at Newton's birthday festivities highlighted the leader's absence, it also anticipated the emergence of new Panther leaders to take Newton's position. The dueling images, then, of Newton as resistor and Seale as oppressed, were self-conscious *fictions* about the two individuals that expressed the organization's political stance.

While Newton's rattan chair photograph offered the "primitive" as a source of power, the illustration of Seale in the electric chair presented it as a site of domination. Here, the "primitive" appears in the guise of slavery—an antiquated system of oppression that lurks in the modern system of trial and execution. Between the two drawings of Seale, the court's handcuffs and tape evolved into the executioner's heavy restraints, and Seale's contemporary clothes and black boots morphed into a white shirt, suspenders, and bare feet. By dressing Seale in a manner evocative of the "field slave" whom the Panthers followed Malcolm X in admiring, Douglas positioned the electric chair in the tradition of slavery and lynching. The electric chair appears, in fact, as the industrial incarnation of

lynching, legitimated by its position within the repressive state apparatus. The slave, on the other hand, represents the “primitive” emerging out of rather than existing before industry. The “primitive” slave system is not temporally separated from today’s racism, the image suggests. Instead, it re-emerges in moments of 20<sup>th</sup>-century racism, and it brings with it the threat of the resistance. Although Seale may be bound and gagged, in the role of Malcolm X’s “field slave” he is not a helpless victim but a potential revolutionary.

The Panthers’ revolutionary threat emerges, then, both from the American oppression that binds Seale and from cultural forms of primitivism that position Newton as a tribal chieftain. Although both images exhibit forms of machismo and hero worship, the combination of the two opposed images suggests that the Panthers refused to posit themselves as simply saviors of black women and children or as the valiant heroes of a helpless community. They were, instead, part of that community—helpless as well as heroes.

Of course, the two figures *were* men, and we cannot discount their masculinist imagery or the real sexism that pervaded Party ranks.<sup>47</sup> The Party originally recruited men, appealing to their desires to protect black women and children, and even when women entered the Party, they were deemed “Pantherettes” and separated from male cadre (Jennings; LeBlanc-Ernest). By 1968 the Party eliminated this term and consolidated men and women together in the ranks. Even then, reports from former members suggest that women sometimes faced sexual or physical harassment at the hands of male Panthers and that they were disproportionately assigned cooking and cleaning roles (Joseph 244). Regina Jennings notes the especially frightening example of

Janet Cyril, a key member in the BPP's Brooklyn branch who was expelled for refusing sex with another Party member (292). Just as the women's movement impacted many activist and mainstream organizations of the time period, the protests of Black Panther women led to significant changes over time. In 1969, Ericka Huggins founded and became the leader of the New Haven BPP chapter, and by 1974 Elaine Brown took charge of the entire national organization (LeBlanc-Ernest 310-21).

Party ideology reflected a similar evolution over time. Early analyses reflected an anti-feminist perspective, as Eldridge Cleaver became famous for announcing that women could participate in the revolution by employing "pussy power"—using their sexuality to influence male behavior (E. Brown 191). In a September 1968 edition of *The Black Panther*, two articles written by Panther women stressed that women should maintain subordinate roles. Linda Greene argues that a Panther woman "is what her man, and what her people, need her to be, when they need her. [. . .] In her work, she does not distract the men with whom she works when it is the time for work" (11). Gloria Bartholomew similarly argues that "the black women must drop the white ways of trying to be equal to the Black man. [. . .] We black women today must serve as an inspirational booster to our Black men" (11). For Bartholomew, even the proud capitalization of "Black" as an adjective applied only to black *men*.

A year, however, would dramatically change such public statements. In August 1969, Candi Robinson insisted in *The Black Panther* that "for far too long we have been double oppressed, not only by capitalist society, but also by our men. [. . .] We must continue to educate our men, and bring their minds from a male chauvinistic level to a higher level" (9). In a 1970 interview with *The Guardian*, Seale commented that "The

concept I'm trying to establish is the cross-relation of male chauvinism to any other form of chauvinism—including racism. In other words the idea of saying 'keep a woman in her place' is only a short step away from saying 'keep a nigger in his place'" (Foner, *The Black Panthers Speak* 86). Even Cleaver, by July of 1969, had admitted that:

The demand for liberation of women in Babylon is the issue that is going to explode, and if we're not careful it's going to destroy our ranks, destroy our organization, because women want to be liberated just as all oppressed people want to be liberated. So if we go around and call ourselves a vanguard organization, then we've got to be the vanguard in all our behavior [. . . and] recognize, that women are our other half, they're not our weaker half, they're not our stronger half, but they're our other half. (Foner, *The Black Panthers Speak* 99)

Moreover, despite rampant homophobia in the Party (and in society at large), especially in public comments by Newton and Cleaver, Newton led the BPP in supporting gay liberation by 1970, and Ogbar cites an openly gay Panther who earned the respect of the Jamaica Queens, New York branch. The group was influenced on this front in part by a camaraderie with Jean Genet, the gay French writer who admired the Panthers and had traveled to the United States for an extended visit with them (*Black Power* 102).

Even after these changes in policy, Panther behavior certainly didn't always live up to organizational aims on matters of feminism and gay liberation. As many scholars have noted, however, they were not the only ones to fail. The mainstream civil rights movement, too, had a dearth of women in leadership positions, and Students for a Democratic Society struggled with the demands of its female members to address sexism. Mary King and Casey Hayden of SNCC spoke out against their organization's sexism in 1964 with the position paper "Women in the Movement," and in July 1967 SDS women did the same (Hayden and King 568-69; Lefever 209-10). These moments of feminist

resistance, however, did not result in miraculous changes within their organizations any more than they did in the Black Panther Party. SNCC's Stokely Carmichael responded to the former by remarking that "the position of women in SNCC is prone" (though, according to Lefever, this may have been in jest), and SDS member and future Weatherman Bill Ayers remembers responding: "chicks in charge...you've got to love it" (Brownmiller 13-14; Lefever 209-11; Ayers 104). In 1970, Robin Morgan expressed anger with the slow response of male radicals, as her famous tirade "Goodbye to All That" accused the whole left of being steeped in sexism. Outside of radical organizations, anti-feminist and anti-gay sentiments were even more virulent and more structurally damaging. Former SDS member Robert Pardun recalls that, on a summer 1966 trip to a Smithsonian archaeological dig in Wyoming, his female companion was forbidden from participating because "the Smithsonian didn't hire women for fieldwork" (153).

### **Organizing the "Lumpen": Revisions to Marx's Working-Class Narrative**

The Black Panther Party's masculinist and primitivist imagery, then, had clear flaws. It romanticized Third World revolutions and the role of men in generating resistance. At the same time, their imagery did generate sentiments of international solidarity based on re-writings of the "primitive." And just as the Panthers specified particular revolutionary Third World nations in their definition of the "primitive," they likewise used their newspaper to offer specifics about black *Americans* and their relationship to the "primitive." *The Black Panther* revealed specific details about African-American lives in order to translate primitive and industrial metaphors from a theoretical plane into the real terms of activist work. Moreover, their strategy of mixing abstract

tropes and specific personal details helped the Panthers express their unique political ideology and its relationship to cultural understandings of race.

A 1970 issue of the newspaper, which printed a “Letter Written by a Racist to Sister Frances Carter of the Conn. 9, Recently Released from Prison,” illustrates the Panther’s use of specific details to describe black American life. The letter began with the exhortation to “do us a favor and go back to Harlem or Africa, where you belong,” equating Harlem and black Americans with Africa—an association that might have appeared in the poetry of Madhubuti or Sonia Sanchez. In this case, however, the equation was simple racism. In this instance, the white racist conflation of the two locations did not call for a complex discussion about the relationship between black Americans and Africa or the possibility of a black aesthetic. As a result, the Panthers recognized the need to move beyond abstract tropes of identification when dealing directly with white racism. Although they adopted metaphors of the primitive and of American industrial life, the newspaper refused to locate them in simply “Africa” or “Harlem.” Instead, people’s names, their occupations (or status as prisoners or soldiers), and their homes and addresses became the stuff of the Panther aesthetic. On the same page as the racist letter, *The Black Panther* editors detailed the “inhuman living conditions” of Mary Williams at 615-619 Ocean Avenue in Jersey City, as maintained by landlord Dr. Lakend; an attack on a police station in Roxbury; the failure of the Winston-Salem jail to repay the widow of Henry Martin Foy for his deposits on good behavior bond; and an unjustified police attack on Flozell Johnson of the Mission Hill projects in Boston. These stories trace, in some cases down to a particular address, the origins of

black community members—not the tropes of Harlem or Africa but 615 Ocean Avenue in Jersey City or the Mission Hill projects in Boston.

Such specificity brought primitive metaphors down to earth, and by mixing abstract tropes with concrete examples the Panthers asked the public to interpret the “primitive” in a new way. While it is traditionally seen as a historical and developmental point that will progress into civilization, the Black Panthers presented the “primitive” as an inevitable byproduct of capitalism. Industry, the Panthers suggested, did not replace the “primitive” as a civilization advanced. Instead, civilization—specifically industrial capitalism—generated the “primitive” as a threatening and potentially revolutionary byproduct. Although the Panthers could not simply erase the problematic connotations of primitivist imagery, they did force viewers to confront and re-evaluate primitivist representations of both race and progress.

When they suggested that the “primitive” grew out of industrial capitalist society, the Panthers used aesthetics to illustrate their political theory. Unlike traditional socialist organizations (though like many of their New Left cohorts), the BPP did not see the working class as the primary revolutionary class. The Russian and Chinese revolutions had already questioned the notion that revolution would emerge first in the industrial center, and Mao had modified Marx by validating the peasantry as a revolutionary social force. The Panthers, inspired as they were by Mao (the *Little Red Book* was required reading in political education classes) and Third World revolutions, *did* inhabit the world’s industrial core, and they aimed to make a revolution out of the materials they had. In urban North America, this meant working with an impoverished population that



was struggling with unemployment and decaying inner cities. This setting was, in Panther imagery and language, a new “primitive.”

Because the African-American ghetto was their environment, the Panthers did not share the traditional Marxist notion of the factory as the site of struggle and the promise of utopian dreams. The BPP saw the black population as the detritus of the industrial system, denied working-class industrial jobs and relegated to the ranks of the poor and the unemployed. Marxist terminology, especially as interpreted by Mao Zedong and Frantz Fanon, remained basic to Panther vocabulary, but in place of the working class they posited the “lumpenproletariat” as the key revolutionary actors. The lumpenproletariat includes figures like prostitutes, criminals, and the homeless who exist outside the wage labor system. Marx had dismissed this class as counterrevolutionary and regressive. Fanon, on the other hand, had celebrated the potential of the urban lumpenproletariat while cautioning that, due to lack of education and political sophistication, they could be too easily swayed by either revolutionary or the counterrevolutionary forces (Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire* 75-78; Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* 81-87).<sup>48</sup>

Although Fanon’s reading of society’s bottom layer was not wholly sanguine, the Panthers embraced his hopes for this group wholeheartedly and declared themselves a party of the “Lumpen.” As Eldridge Cleaver remarked in one of the Party’s many ideological tracts: “the streets belong to the Lumpen, and [ . . . ] it is in the streets that the Lumpen will make their rebellion” (E. Cleaver, “On the Ideology” 15). In part, this enthusiasm about the lumpenproletariat grew out of the black urban population’s struggles with unemployment. Between 1966 and 1972, when the Panthers were at their

height, the unemployment rate for whites ranged from a low of 3.1% in 1969 to a high of 5.4% in 1971, while for nonwhites the rate fluctuated between 6.4% in 1969 and 10% in 1972 (Carter). The situation was far worse in the Panthers' national headquarters in Oakland. In 1964, two years before Newton and Seale started the organization, Oakland's unemployment rate was 11% for all workers and 20% for African Americans. The city's manufacturing sector was also in decline, falling by 22.5% between 1958 and 1966 and forcing many of Oakland's manufacturing workers to commute outside the city as plants moved into suburban spaces (Self 170-71; Nicholls and Babbie 104-06). Meanwhile, manufacturing opportunities increased for workers in the suburbs when whites moved out of inner cities to take advantage of federal subsidies for new-construction housing. These new suburbanites aimed to build what historian Robert Self refers to as "industrial gardens" in the suburbs—locations that offered both wide open green spaces for leisure and major industry for economic stability.

The dream of the "industrial garden" left Oakland's black residents with the dregs of industrial development and few opportunities for factory jobs. Explicit segregation was rampant among real estate developers in the 1960s, and the newly built homes in the suburbs were literally off limits to African-Americans. Meanwhile, new highways and public transportation facilities tore through black neighborhoods to make way for suburban commuters, and urban "redevelopment" destroyed areas that city councils deemed undesirable.<sup>49</sup> For many, working-class factory jobs simply weren't available, and consequently the factory—whose labor unions had often been dominated by white workers<sup>50</sup>—seemed an inappropriate place for a black-led revolution.

In response to capitalism's claim that industry spread wealth everywhere it went, the Panthers painted industry as a threat to black America. It didn't offer jobs, and it didn't even present the promise of worker solidarity on behalf of a socialist future. Instead, the industrial world appeared as the cause of urban blight and the source of African-American misery. The June 6, 1970 issue of *The Black Panther* illustrated the deteriorated industrial world with particular eloquence. The front cover portrayed three children approaching the camera. A building in the background, missing all its windows, bears the marks of smoke and fire, and in front of the building stands a pile of debris. Although one of the children smiles and gestures toward the camera, another, who wears a black leather jacket, stares coldly ahead, with one hand at his side formed into a fist. The photo appears again on the second page with two headline stories: "Housing Conditions: Capitalism and our Children" and "Brownsville." These articles illustrate the photo by reading the urban landscape as an example of the "primitive" that industrial capitalism has generated. On these pages, the "primitive" is both damaging to the black community and potentially threatening to white hegemony. The children, meanwhile, appear as victims and possible future Panthers, as one wears a leather jacket and forms a nascent Black Power fist.

Afeni Shakur<sup>51</sup> composed the first of the two articles, "Housing Conditions: Capitalism and Our Children." Three photos flank the articles: the cover photo, a photo of four children jumping on a stripped box spring in the midst of urban trash titled "Contradictions in the land of plenty," and a photo of a woman holding an emaciated baby captioned "Brownsville, U.S.A. or Capetown South Africa." These images, paired with Shakur's text, present children as the victims and the inhabitants of the post-

industrial city. Brownsville's economy had been based on its garment manufacturing (a sweatshop industry that certainly didn't connote wealth and upward mobility) and its construction work (ironic in these photographs that depict the work of urban destruction rather than re-building), but this text depicts the industrial wasteland *beyond* the workplaces of the factory, the construction team, or the sweatshop (Pritchett).<sup>52</sup> No longer a center of capitalist accumulation, the landscape becomes a warped playground barren of workers. Only children remain to march through the rotting industrial framework of their neighborhood: "little fingers are cut, not on just little pieces of glass, but on steel beams, that have become too corroded to hold a roof up." Like the treacherous jungle that threatened colonial explorers such as Conrad's fictional Kurtz, here the industrial environment assaults the children. Shakur suggests that this decimation actually *benefits* industry: "Brooklyn, like Harlem, is being prepared for an industrial takeover. The filthy businessmen cannot do this until the people have been either burned out, bombed out, or shot out." Industrial capitalism, in this article, resembles colonialism as it strips the landscape of its resources while displacing its people.

Brooklyn Panther D. Jenkins expands Shakur's analysis by making explicit these suggestions about the industrial "jungle." Jenkins's article "Brooklyn" shares the page with Shakur's and begins by describing how the "roar of the Panther" has awakened the black "colony" to the abuses of the police and the capitalist structure. The people of the "Black jungle," Jenkins insists, will only get "complete satisfaction [by] chopping that head [of the power structure] off and throwing the remains into a huge pot to be bar-be-queued." Jenkins invokes cartoon images of "primitive" cannibalism in which an African or Polynesian cannibal monitors a huge pot containing a dismembered colonialist. Jenkins

morphs the primitivist fantasy of Western colonialists into a revolutionary fantasy for black Americans. In the same way that Marx's alienating workplace can become the scene of worker solidarity, the Panthers insist that racist primitivism can become the metaphorical setting for black revolution.

This revolutionary optimism grows through the identification of black Americans with the oppression of their Third World peers. Both Shakur and Jenkins make these associations by applying metaphors of tropical disease to the urban ghetto. Shakur remarks that "[frustration] bubbles over, into the blood of our children who are most affected by this sickness. This cancer is called CAPITALISM," and Jenkins describes "'Ghetto diseases'; diseases that the capitalists are directly responsible for (lead poisoning, rat bites, anemia, etc.)." Framed by the photo of a woman and her starving child identified as Brownsville or Capetown, these tropes of illness play on both the white fear of "tropical disease" and the Third World reality of starvation and economic deprivation. "Ghetto diseases," like tropical diseases, thrive because of environmental factors, and in Brownsville those factors are capitalism and racism. Likewise, the link to South Africa intentionally shocks readers into viewing the US ghetto as a Third World location marked by poverty and desperation. At the same time, it also embraces Panther Third World solidarity. Whether in Brownsville or Capetown, this woman and her child seek justice. Shakur reinforces this message when she describes Brownsville as a neighborhood of "Black and Puerto Rican people," widening her scope beyond the black community into a larger "people of color" community.

If Shakur and Jenkins re-define the "primitive" as an oppressed space generated by colonial or capitalist systems, they likewise re-work Marxist notions of the

“industrial” by challenging the privileged status of the industrial worker. Marx argued that the lumpenproletariat did not share the *interests* of the working class because their fate was not tied up in relations of production. Jenkins rejects this assessment, however, when she suggests that the “Lumpen,” too, have political interests and economic power. Although they might not be able to attack production by striking, they can attack the capitalist system indirectly by targeting urban landlords. “Tell that fool landlord responsible for all of those scattered vacant lots throughout Brownsville,” Jenkins says, “that he no longer owns that land, that in fact he stole it from you and you are taking it back as an overdue payment of the 40 acres and two mules his grandfather promised yours.”

Rent strikes (a form of political action that the Communist Party had regularly used in New York in the past) emerge as the point of influence between the “Lumpen” and the capitalist structure just as, in other Panther texts, attacks on the petit bourgeois police force appear as revolutionary moments. Similarly, the high rates of both incarceration and military service among the black population led the Panthers to define the “Lumpen” not only as the urban unemployed or underemployed but also as prisoners<sup>53</sup> and military personnel.<sup>54</sup> Demands to release all black prisoners from military service, as well as the economic petitions for full employment, decent housing, and reparations, were brought together in the Panthers’ central “Ten-Point Platform,” which was reprinted in every issue. By juxtaposing calls to “Free Huey,” “Free Bobby,” or “Free the Panther 21” with stories about landlord/tenant disputes and Panther/pig confrontations, the Black Panthers identified the urban poor, prisoners, and potential “guerrilla warriors” as the core groups who constituted “the people.” Traditional Marxists

would consider this a mistake, in part because landlords and police officers make poor targets. Police targets, as the Panthers discovered, force an organization into armed confrontation and severe government oppression, while landlord targets may affect only small groups of tenants at one time.

The Panthers pursued these strategies, whatever their flaws, in part *because* of their understanding of the “primitive” as a byproduct of the industrial world. Disillusioned about the prospects of workplace resistance, the Panthers attempted to elevate the lumpenproletariat into a more prominent position. If the “Lumpen” did not take part in the traditional capitalist economy, the BPP attempted to initiate them into an alternative economic and social structure within the black community. Most Panthers “worked” as full-time activists, transforming their “unemployed” status into the work of community building and communal living. In doing so, they questioned dependence on alienating industrial labor and highlighted industry’s role in producing a bleak and desolate urban space.<sup>55</sup> While some members took on militaristic roles, taking on the goals of “guerrilla warfare” or patrolling the police, others adopted “civilian” roles in the community structure. Family, home, and community were crucial components of Panther imagery *and* action, and this is often glossed over in favor of their more aggressive rhetoric. In the images described above, children and the need for urban play spaces take center stage. Likewise, stories detailing landlord/tenant disputes or photos of Huey Newton interacting with children (which appeared frequently after Newton’s release from prison) tempered the militaristic images that likewise claimed space in the newspaper. On the streets, Panthers acted out these family-friendly images by generating free community services from the profits of local business. Panther members solicited (or coerced)<sup>56</sup>

donations from local merchants for community programs and spent their days running free breakfast, free medical clinic, free grocery, or free transportation to prison programs. By demanding the right to contributions from local entrepreneurs and by establishing free programs for basic needs, the “Lumpen” began to construct a new set of economic relations for the urban black community.

By portraying the “industrial” through the eyes of the “Lumpen”—largely the unemployed, the imprisoned, and the enlisted—*The Black Panther* questioned the simplicity of this trope as well as the “primitive.” If the “primitive” could grow out of industrial society and racism, the “Lumpen” could also emerge from this mix as revolutionary actors. *The Black Panther*’s practice of documenting and making visible this layer of society people legitimated its members as both the oppressed and as revolutionary subjects. Like the dual images of Newton and Seale, they had two possible positions: Newton’s powerful primitivist one and Seale’s condemned status within the system. Moreover, by identifying the black American ghetto as a colonial space, the Panthers built Third World solidarities to bolster their economic and political strength within the United States. The ghetto appeared as a colonial location stripped of its raw materials and guarded by the empire’s local elite. This was a form of *post-industrial* colonialism, and it gave the Panthers a connection to the global anti-colonial movement as they attempted to revise traditional Marxist notions and compensate for the gaps in their own strategies of resistance.

### **Aesthetics and Ethics: Finding the Right Level of Abstraction**

In the collection of Panther tropes that I have discussed, we can see how the organization produced images, rhetoric, and physical performances that required analysis.



While Black Arts dramatists Ed Bullins, Jimmy Garrett, and Amiri Baraka depicted revolutionary moments on stage, leading viewers to consider both the ethics and the aesthetics of Black Power, the Black Panthers took real actions that might have led to revolutions like those in Baraka's *The Slave*, Garrett's *We Own the Night*, or Bullins's *Death List*. These Black Arts plays challenged activists with pragmatic, specific examples of ethical dilemmas, and all three of the authors suggest that revolution is corrupt even as they remain committed to the Black Power cause. For the Black Panthers, who sometimes confronted the realities of FBI informants and rival organizations with guns drawn, such questions did not appear on some detached artistic plane. They used the fuzzy line between aesthetics and reality as a cover from government oppression, though they might have benefited from more critical engagement with these issues on an ethical level. Black Arts writers, on the other hand, often lamented their *inability* to make the transition into action, and their coexistence if not direct alliance with organizations like the Panthers gave real context and meaning to their art. If, as Baraka claimed, "poems are bullshit" unless they *do* something, then Black Arts work might have been "bullshit" without the contribution of the Panthers and the host of other activist groups that lived out the radicalism of the black aesthetic.

By positioning the Black Panthers *within* the literary history of the Black Arts Movement, we can see the ways that both BAM artists and Black Power activists struggled against simplified readings of political art. Reflecting on the history of the BAM, former participant, poet, and essayist A.B. Spellman remarked that "some called it the new mimesis because it made a mirror that affirmed us. But I thought that it was an anti-mimetic art, for it was art beyond the probable, beyond talking, beat down reality,

beyond the oppressive ‘is.’ Why do art if you can’t make worlds and populate them with perfectible brethren?” Spellman directs us to widen our perspective of the Black Arts Movement beyond realism. Although political art is often criticized for adopting social realist or allegorical models, Spellman reminds us that Black Arts was *not* simply mimetic. Instead, it was often fantastical, utopian, dystopian, or simply abstract even as it engaged Black Power politics.

The Black Panthers, with their fantastical images of the barnyard, the jungle, and the urban space populated with anti-colonial guerrilla warriors, likewise embraced political metaphors that were not always realistic. Like Black Arts writers and visual artists, they imagined improbable versions of political futures even as they attempted to create them. When Eldridge Cleaver posed the shot of Huey Newton in his rattan chair, or when Emory Douglas imagined Bobby Seale as a field slave in the electric chair, they asked viewers to see these images within the complex history of racialized metaphors. They required the public to make a link between the electric chair and the rattan chair or between the spear and the gun, and they offered no easy answers. At the same time, their presentation of the “primitive” Newton and the industrial deterioration of the urban neighborhood asked readers to view primitive and industrial metaphors as concrete and embodied realities rather than simply tropes. Artistic representations of the “primitive” and the “industrial” can revel in complexity and open-endedness. The Panthers, on the other hand, attempted to combine anti-mimetic tropes with concrete, *real* models for political change.

Today, Panther imagery and rhetoric continues to have cultural currency even though the organization has long since died. Consequently, the question remains whether

the Panthers' rhetoric and imagery ultimately benefited or damaged the organization's political projects. For twenty-first century artists like Dead Prez, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, Common, Aaron McGruder, The Game, and Kanye West, the "panther" and "Huey" are so commonly used to describe radicalism that they have themselves become tropes. These terms, like the phrase "off the pigs" and "power to the people," or the image of Newton in his rattan chair, can sometimes lose their political force when detached from their political, historical, and aesthetic context. Although many of today's artists, including Mos Def and Aaron McGruder, employ Panther tropes to give young listeners and readers access to a radical black history that rarely appears in their textbooks, the very different political moment of the early twenty-first century threatens to flatten Panther references to simple celebrations of revolution or replications of primitivism. Hip-hop artist the Game, for instance, associates Newton with a generic "gangsta" figure that has only a vague anti-racist political position when he raps of "Huey P. Newton with Air Force Ones On" (Air Force Ones are a popular basketball shoe) (Snoop Dogg featuring the Game). The Game grasps at the masculinity and violence of the Panther image without engaging its revolutionary politics, producing a commodified version of the Panthers for the new millennium.

In problematic examples like these, twenty-first century references to the Panthers invoke the same mixture of urban hip and African culture that attracted recruits in the 1960s, but while these tropes once appeared in the context of the Algerian, Ghanaian, and Tanzanian revolutions and the founding of the International Section of the Black Panther Party, they have lost the concrete elements that awarded political purpose to abstract images. Yet even as the Game commodifies the Panthers as simple signifiers of violence,

he cannot empty them of their radical meanings. In fact, he employs them precisely to invoke a radical authenticity. Just as the Panthers could not adopt the panther or the spear without engaging racist primitivism, today's artists cannot invoke the panther or Newton without referencing black radicalism. The fame of the Black Panthers, in fact, has distanced the term "panther" from race and attached it instead to radical politics. In the years immediately following the BPP's emergence, this trend appeared in the guise of majority white groups with names like the "White Panthers" and the "Gray Panthers" who adopted the panther as a sign of tough radicalism rather than of race.<sup>57</sup> Even Marvel has re-signified its racist panther caricature into a figure who resembles Huey Newton. The comic book Black Panther now fights racism, speaks about his views on Malcolm X, and appears with a spear and African masks in a pose reminiscent of Newton's.

The Black Panther Party recognized that it could not erase primitivist signifiers from American culture by invoking black American intellect, political savvy, or revolutionary sentiment. Instead, it chose to work through the "primitive," layering racist stereotypes with political analyses, abstract tropes, and concrete examples. In doing so, it may not have prevented *Time* and *Newsweek* from referring to its members as "purring" or "pouncing" Panthers, but it did "contaminate" the primitive by adding layers of resistance to its racist past. The term "panther," then, comes to twenty-first-century activists and scholars as a palimpsest—fraught with its racist history yet also engraved by revolutionaries not just with guns and spears but with political analyses. As a result, while the primitive may not become a contemporary tool of political radicalism, its aesthetic longevity has allowed Panther politics to linger in the American political psyche

even if the organization has died. The Black Panther Party might have allowed Josephine Baker to say “I had a mascot—a panther” in a new tone of voice.

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<sup>1</sup> Baker’s animal was a spotted feline that was referred to alternately in the press as a leopard, a panther, and a cheetah. Ean Wood argues that the animal was in fact a cheetah (165). In this text, I will refer to the animal as a panther because it was most commonly categorized as a leopard or panther and because this appellation associates the animal with a set of primitivist tropes that both Baker and the Black Panthers employed in reference to themselves.

<sup>2</sup> Although cartoon images used to advertise Josephine Baker often depicted her as very dark skinned, Baker herself had quite light skin. This disjuncture allowed the public to take pleasure in her “primitive” status by imagining her as very dark. Her actual skin tone might have given her some level of privilege off-stage, and it may have made her seem more acceptable to the French when she transitioned from *la danse sauvage* into more glamorous singing roles.

<sup>3</sup> See the introduction or Lemke’s *Primitivist Modernism* for a fuller discussion of primitivism and the Harlem Renaissance.

<sup>4</sup> I use the term Marxian to describe the Panthers because their ideology borrowed from Marxist principles and theorists without adhering rigidly to “traditional” Marxist notions that might have questioned their reliance on the lumpenproletariat or their embrace of “revolutionary nationalism.”

<sup>5</sup> “Cultural nationalism” describes black nationalism that emphasizes the importance of culture in transforming society. Many organizations in the 1960s embraced both cultural and political change as part of black liberation, including the Panthers. Maulana Karenga’s US Organization is most frequently cited as an example of black cultural nationalism, and later strains of Afrocentric thought popularized by Molefi Asante also express cultural nationalist principles. Although nearly all black radical groups in the 1960s incorporated some interest in black culture, the term “cultural nationalism” has often been used in a derogatory way (see note 6).

<sup>6</sup> The Panthers viewed cultural nationalism as a means of replacing real political action with style. More specifically, they saw it as a tool of black capitalism that would co-opt and destroy revolutionary politics. Eldridge Cleaver commented in an interview published in *The Black Panther* in October 1969 that “black people have already gained their consciousness, they have a sense of their identity, which was lost in the United States. At the time that this was happening, it was very progressive, it was a good thing that was coming about. But after people had assimilated that and were reminded of who they were and everything, to maintain that position and not to go any further becomes reactionary” (Foner, *The Black Panthers Speak* 110). Cleaver insists that Marxist-Leninism is the better political strategy for mobilizing and that cultural nationalism, while more effective initially in winning public sentiment, will lead to oppressive regimes just as any other nationalist movement would (111). Newton adds that cultural nationalism seeks to move back in time by restoring African traditions without addressing the problem of oppression. “We believe that culture itself will not liberate us,” he says. “We’re going to need some stronger stuff” (Foner, *The Black Panthers Speak* 50).

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The Panthers' denunciations of cultural nationalism, however, make clear that the group does not *reject* the use of culture and identity in organizing. They stress, however, that revolutionary movements must move beyond culture and remain wary of culture's potential for cooptation. Although capitalism clearly attempted to hijack black pride for its own benefit, most cultural nationalist groups were not as simplistic as the Panthers suggest. Their ongoing feud with the cultural nationalist US organization probably embittered their specific critiques. As Jeffrey Ogbar notes, other ethnic nationalist movements, including the Chicano Movement, the Young Lords, and the American Indian Movement, did not see any contradiction between revolutionary and cultural nationalism ("Brown Power to Brown People" 260). In fact, by referring to their own brand of socialism as "revolutionary nationalism," the Panthers suggested that culture and identity remained central to their project.

<sup>7</sup> The Soul Students Advisory Council was affiliated with the Revolutionary Action Movement [RAM], a national black radical organization (Newton 106).

<sup>8</sup> See Philip Foner's *The Black Panthers Speak* for the full text of "What We Want/What We Believe." The ten demands are as follows:

"1. We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community."

"2. We want full employment for our people."

"3. We want an end to the robbery by the white man of our Black Community."

"4. We want decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings."

"5. We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society."

"6. We want all black men to be exempt from military service."

"7. We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of black people."

"8. We want freedom for all black men held in federal, state, county and city prisons and jails."

"9. We want all black people when brought to trial to be tried in court by a jury of their peer group or people from their black communities, as defined by the Constitution of the United States."

"10. We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace. And as our major political objective, a United Nations supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the black colony in which only black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate for the purpose of determining the will of black people as to their national destiny."

<sup>9</sup> Newton's autobiography makes it unclear whether he and Seale began their police patrols before or after they composed the "Ten-Point Platform". He recollects that they began police patrols in spring of 1966, but he also recounts that they set down their program in October 1966, before they began patrols (114-15). Seale's autobiography insists that police patrols did not start until approximately a month and a half after the October 1966 writing of the "Ten-Point Platform" (59-66).

<sup>10</sup> Their political engagement with aesthetics was by no means new. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx insists that epochal events recur: "the first time as tragedy, the second as farce" (594). He suggests that political actors look to their

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revolutionary ancestors for “names, battle slogans and costumes.” Marx’s dramatic metaphors reveal not only that political action is a form of performance, as many scholars have noted, but that activism creates a genealogy of resistance by drawing on earlier literary and metaphorical structures as well as political ones.

<sup>11</sup> Born as Ronald Everett, he took the Swahili name Maulana Karenga and is variously referred to in scholarship as Maulana Karenga, Maulana Ron Karenga, and Ron Karenga (Woodard, *A Nation* 71). A former student activist in California, Karenga began the US Organization and became perhaps the most famous cultural nationalist in the country.

<sup>12</sup> US denotes the word “us,” as in “us vs. them.” The Panthers and US had major organizational conflicts, and as a result, the Panthers referred to US as “United Slaves.” Their appellation became so common that those who document the period—whether historians or former activists—often mistakenly reproduce it. See Ngozi-Brown for a more extended discussion of the US Organization and its mistaken identification.

<sup>13</sup> Churchill and Vander Wall reproduce FBI documents that illustrate the government’s program of exacerbating conflict between US and the BPP. The documents include threatening cartoons sent to the Panthers ostensibly from the US Organization and similar cartoons directed back at US. These files also reflect the FBI’s satisfaction at having been successful when its work resulted in the deaths of several Panther members. M. Wesley Swearingen, a former FBI agent, claims that the FBI interfered even more directly and that the US members involved in the shoot-out were infiltrators working for the FBI.

<sup>14</sup> The term “pork chop nationalist” belongs to the Panther tradition of complicated and contradictory tropes. Smethurst defines a “pork chop nationalist” as “a nationalist who is more concerned with what he or she eats, the names of his or her children, or the clothes he or she wears than real questions of political power” (*The Black Arts Movement* 302). On the most basic level, the Panthers derided US for linking racialized consumption to political action—they imagined US claiming black authenticity by eating pork chops. In this sense, the Panthers identified US with claims to an American rather than a pan-African blackness. While US members often wore dashikis, took African names, and studied Swahili, it was the American pork chop that framed the Panthers’ disapproval. The black American who fell into this interpretation of “pork chop nationalist,” however, would have seemed a perfect fit for the Panther program. The BPP capitalized on American urban style and recruited from the working-class and lower-class black population. In this sense, then, the epithet of “pork chop nationalist” may have suggested the Panthers’ derision for those who chose not to join the organization. It did not, however, clearly define the BPP’s ideological differences with US. In particular, what constituted “culture,” and what kind of cultural expressions were acceptable for black revolutionaries? Many Panthers did, after all, take African names, wear dashikis, and celebrate an idealized African culture, including through their use of the panther image. Bobby Seale was even known (and continues to be known) for his barbecue pork recipes. The division between the trope of the pork chop and the trope of the panther remains unclear.

The phrase “pork chop nationalist” also invokes the Panthers’ tradition of referring to the police as pigs. A pork chop nationalist could be one who *eats* pigs (and in this case, perhaps, he might align himself with the Panther program), but *The Black Panther* newspaper more frequently depicted “pork chop nationalists” *as* pigs. In fact,

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police were also sometimes referred to as pork chops, perhaps with the implied threat that they might soon be dead “pork chops” rather than living pigs (“19 Year Old Sister Murdered by Fascist K.C. Pigs” 21). Similarly, in a 1968 edition of the paper, a cartoon depicts an “Uncle Tom pork chop nationalist” as a black pig, and an issue about a year later referred to Karenga and his followers as “pork chop piglets” (*The Black Panther* 26 Oct. 1968; Blood Brother). In these cases, the Panthers suggested that cultural nationalism, like policing, was an actual threat to the black community. In this interpretation, the term becomes especially fraught, as it loses its political content and becomes simply a factional epithet.

<sup>15</sup> Although revolutionary nationalists like the Black Panthers often viewed the dispute in terms of a binary between cultural nationalist “abstraction” and concrete revolutionary nationalist politics, the reality was more complicated. US, like the Black Panther Party, was an activist group as well as a cultural organization. It, too, viewed political revolution as the aim of black radicalism, but it saw race rather than class as the strategic focus for black Americans. Cultural revolution, US and its leader Maulana Ron Karenga argued, must precede political revolution, and the organization consequently focused on the development of black community arts and the celebration of black holidays (Kwanzaa is its most famous creation) (Van Deburg 171-4).

<sup>16</sup> In addition to Douglas, the Panthers’ most famous artist, the Black Panther party cultivated and published a host of lesser known poets and visual artists. The first woman to join the party, J. Tarika Lewis, contributed illustrations to *The Black Panther* under the name of Matilaba (LeBlanc-Ernest 307). Future Panther leader Elaine Brown was a singer and songwriter, and she composed the BPP anthem, and student activist Iris Wyse frequently published poetry in *The Black Panther*, as did Lothario Lotho and New York Panther Afeni Shakur. An array of other poets published one or two pieces in *The Panther*, including some otherwise famous writers such as Diane di Prima and Sonia Sanchez (*The Black Panther* 26 Oct. 1968).

<sup>17</sup> Sanchez appeared in episode two and Baraka in episode four of the first season, and Madhubuti was featured in the third episode of the second season (all originally aired in 2002).

<sup>18</sup> This date does not reflect simply a change in Baraka’s personal life. After moving to Harlem, he founded the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School [BART/S], an institution for up-and-coming black artists that offered accessible artistic training and public performances for the black community (Baraka, *Autobiography*).

<sup>19</sup> Sanchez published the poems “Death Poem,” “Memorial 2 Bobby Hutton” and “Small Comment” in the September 28, 1968 edition of *The Black Panther*.

<sup>20</sup> It appeared frequently in 1968 but became less frequent in subsequent years. The same was true for *The Black Panther*’s publication of original poetry.

<sup>21</sup> The full list is as follows: Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*; Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*; Kwame Nkrumah, *I Speak of Freedom*; Basil Davidson, *The Lost Cities of Africa*; Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner’s Slave Rebellion*, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, and *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*; Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Before the Mayflower*; Arna Bontemps, *American Negro Poetry*; E.D. Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association*; W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in*



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*America, The Souls of Black Folk*, and *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part Which Africa Has Played in World History*; Basil Davidson, *Black Mother: The Years of the African Slave Trade*; Frantz Fanon, *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*; John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery To Freedom: A History of African Americans*; E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*; Michael Harrington, *The Other America*; A. Jacques Garvey, *Garvey and Garveyism*; Melville Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*; C.L.R. James, *History of Negro Revolt*; Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: An Outline of the New African Culture*, LeRoi Jones, *Blues People*; C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*; Malcolm X and George Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks*; Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*; Kwame Nkrumah, *Ghana: The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah*; William L. Patterson, *We Charge Genocide: The Crime of Government Against the Negro People*; J.A. Rogers, *Africa's Gift to America: The Afro-American in the Making and Saving of the United States*; Charles H. Wesley and Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro is Our History*; C. Vann Woodward and William S. McFeely, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*; Richard Wright, *Native Son* (*The Black Panther* 14 Sept. 1968).

<sup>22</sup>Werner Sollers argues that "Black Art" aims to renounce poetry in order to make it capable of action while Henry Lacey sees it as an example of political art that obsesses about the role of poetry: "the word *Poem* very nearly appears in every statement of the poem itself" (105-7); In Kimberly Bentston's reading, "Black Art" is a call for a black aesthetic with "a new vocabulary and a new clarity of belief" that will be directed to the black community and that will incorporate black cultural forms (such as jazz, scat, bebop, etc) and experiences (124); according to Lloyd Brown, while "confusing racial invective with racial protest and relying on heavy-handed dogma instead of imaginative forms," "Black Art" retains a commitment to poetry as a valuable political tool because of its difference from simple ideological language (122-3). "Black Art" has also drawn fire from readers and critics for its anti-Semitic, anti-Irish, anti-Italian, and misogynist remarks. David Smith offers an excellent, more extensive reading of the poem. He argues that "Black Art" presents a case for an anti-rational poetry that aims to use the concrete, everyday language of people's experiences rather than poetic theory. Baraka includes racist tirades against Jews, Irish, and Italians in his poem, Smith argues, to engage public emotion by invoking racism and then to target that emotion not at the broader ethnic groups but at capitalist owners, police, and the power structure. Smith, like most critics, concludes that Baraka was unsuccessful in this project.

<sup>23</sup> The BPP was under constant government surveillance by the FBI's Counterintelligence Programs, known as COINTELPRO, which targeted radical organizations of both the right and the left. COINTELPRO operated officially between 1956 and 1971, though its nominal demise in 1971 did not mark the end of FBI counterintelligence work (Churchill and VanderWall, *The COINTELPRO Papers* 2, 47). Organizations targeted in the 1960s and early 1970s included the Black Panther Party, the US Organization, the Communist Party, the Socialist Workers Party, Students for a Democratic Society, the American Indian Movement, and the Ku Klux Klan, among others. During these years, the FBI employed informants, *agents provocateurs*, wiretapping, burglary, frame-ups, and even outright murder to investigate and destroy their targets. Chicago Black Panther leader Fred Hampton, for example, was murdered by Chicago police in a set-up orchestrated by the ongoing COINTELPRO surveillance work. See Churchill and VanderWall, *The*

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*COINTELPRO Papers* and *Agents of Repression* for a detailed examination of COINTELPRO, including copies of the highly censored government documents that have been released to the public. For more on Fred Hampton specifically, see Roy Wilkins and Ramsey Clark, *Search and Destroy*.

<sup>24</sup> Jimmy Garrett's *We Own the Night* portrays a dying revolutionary who shoots his mother for threatening to betray the cause, and Ed Bullins's *Death List* portrays a political movement with an ever-growing list of enemies that includes mainstream civil rights figures like Martin Luther King, Sr.

<sup>25</sup> Today, many activists reject the use of the term "Third World" as derogatory, preferring instead terms such as "the Two Thirds World" or "the global South." I have chosen to employ "Third World" throughout my text, however, because it was the accepted terminology during the New Left period that makes up the larger portion of this work. At the time, Third World was used by activists as well as the mainstream media, and activists viewed notions of Third World solidarity as positive and non-derogatory.

<sup>26</sup> This language recalls Jean Toomer's ecstatic association, cited in the introduction, between copper sheets and petals. In this case, the Black Panther represents both the epitome of primitive nature but also the apex of industrial development.

<sup>27</sup> See White, et al for a discussion of afrofuturism and the proliferation of black techno-savvy characters.

<sup>28</sup> Nichelle Nichols comments that she and producer Gene Roddenberry came up with the character's name based on the fact that Nichols brought the book *Uhuru* to her audition (142-44). By choosing a Swahili word for the lone black *Star Trek* character, Roddenberry and Nichols referenced the cultural nationalist fad of learning Swahili and using it to describe radical black American culture. The US Organization, for instance, offered Swahili lessons for members, and Karenga used Swahili terms to describe the organization's value system, Kawaida. As the Black Power movement emerged out of the civil rights movement, chants of "uhuru, uhuru!" began to replace chants of "freedom" in demonstrations across the country.

<sup>29</sup> Later, when Marvel attempted to recuperate the Black Panther character from its roots in racial caricature, it stressed the distinctions between Africans and African-Americans and focused on the Panther's connection to the late internationalist Malcolm X (Hudlin, et al). In the last decade, Marvel has hired African-American writers for *The Black Panther* series and written story arcs that depict the Black Panther fighting the Ku Klux Klan or South African apartheid.

<sup>30</sup> Peniel Joseph also records this encounter (144).

<sup>31</sup> In San Francisco, Chicago, and New York, these organizations were linked to the Revolutionary Action Movement [RAM]. According to Komozi Woodard, the founders of these Black Panther parties had met with SNCC and LCFO organizers and asked permission to use the name (Woodard, "Imamu Baraka" 46). Many of these organizations were short-lived, and they did not all share the same ideological perspectives. In fact, the black panther naming trend created resentment and competition among some of the groups. After joining the fray, the BPP became territorial about the name, and it launched a successful campaign to destroy the original Oakland Black Panther Party after forcing it to re-name itself the Black Panther Political Party (Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement* 302).

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<sup>32</sup> Although I have not been granted copyright permission to reproduce the image of the leaping panther, it can be viewed at <[www.itsabouttimebpp.com](http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com)>.

<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, some police officers did try to rescue the “pig.” According to Erika Doss, some officers created buttons with the acronym P.I.G. for pride, integrity, and guts (Doss 186). Geronimo Pratt also recalls that a fellow Panther had seen a scoreboard in an LA police station reading “Pigs 11, Panthers 0” (Olsen 231).

<sup>34</sup> Several former Panthers have documented their experience in political education classes. According to Akua Njeri, a member of the Party in Chicago (and the murdered Fred Hampton’s surviving fiancée), her branch held three evening political education classes each week. She recalls that participants read political thought such as Mao Zedong, Che Guevara, Malcolm X, Kim Il Sung, and Marcus Garvey. They were required, she noted, to log two hours of reading each day (37). Cleo Silvers of the New York branch confirmed the requirement of reading two hours a day, and she remembers that. “If Dhoruba asked you a question and you did not know it, you had to do fifty laps around the block” (Austin 275). Former FBI Special Agent William Cohendet similarly noted the centrality of political education for California Panthers when he complained to interviewer Roz Payne that most of their informants offered little more information than their classroom discussions of Mao (Payne 166). The classes were not casual affairs, and later in the life of the organization, by 1973, they included full-scale exams about Panther ideology and its relationship to black history (Huey P. Newton Foundation Records 2, Box 4, Folder 3).

<sup>35</sup> Among the African-American public, it was enormously successful. A poll of 1,255 African Americans published in *Time Magazine* in April 1970 revealed that 25% of all respondents and 43% of those under 21 agreed that “The Black Panthers represent my own personal views,” while 64% affirmed the statement that “Panthers give me a sense of pride” (“The Black Mood”).

<sup>36</sup> See Edward Morgan for a full discussion of the Panthers in the mass media. As he reveals, these terms appear in the following issues of *Time* and *Newsweek*: “Panther Hunt” and “snarling intransigence” in *Newsweek*, 22 April 1968, 38B; “pack” in “On the Prowl,” *Newsweek*, 23 September 1968, 35-6; “pussycat” in “The Left: Guns and Butter,” *Newsweek*, 5 May 1969, 40; “Tame Panthers?” in *Time*, 25 December 1972, 13-14; “Purring Panthers” in *Newsweek*, 17 March 1975, 40. “On the Prowl,” Morgan notes, could very well reference Panthers, but it in fact refers to police officers.

<sup>37</sup> Importantly, the *Black Panther* also highlighted colonial and imperial oppression elsewhere in the world, especially Vietnam, China, and Cuba. Individual Panthers also traveled to these locations to express solidarity with Third World peoples. Newly independent *Africa*, however (specifically Algeria), was the site of the Party’s International Section and thus their most extended interactions.

<sup>38</sup> Austin’s archival research offers a useful glimpse into the role of the newspaper in rank-and-file Panther life through the personal diary of New York Panther Cheryl Foster, who recorded her daily activities by the hour. Foster’s schedule included service at the Free Breakfast for Children program, a physical education class, a political education class, “section work,” “office work,” and “community work.” She spent more time selling the newspaper, however, than she did at any of these other tasks. In her daily log

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of Monday-Friday activities, she lists paper selling between the hours of 7:30-9, 12-1, and 3:45-6:30 (more than five hours each day) (Austin 277).

<sup>39</sup> In one case, the FBI planned to taint *The Black Panther* newspapers in Detroit with a substance that reeked of feces (Churchill, *The COINTELPRO Papers* 212).

<sup>40</sup> The international news photos came to *The Black Panther* courtesy of Liberation News Service, which supplied stock material for many alternative and underground newspapers. The graphic nature of international photos, then, was not limited to *The Black Panther* but was a feature of many independent newspapers at the time. It was, however, a practice that the Panthers continued in their own articles and photographs.

<sup>41</sup> Despite the Party's clear problems during and after the split with Cleaver's factions, it continued to do some significant work during the 1970s. Elaine Brown, JoNina Abron, and Robert Self offer positive records of the Panthers during the 1970s, when the organization focused largely on community service programs.

<sup>42</sup> Eventually this strategy would backfire, as the Panther uniform made its wearers a target of police harassment. By 1969, such abuse had forced the Panthers to abandon their uniforms for daily work, although they did don them for public events such as rallies and Party funerals (Austin 188).

<sup>43</sup> Although the rattan chair photograph did not always appear with this essay, it did frequently share newspaper space with political narratives that complicated and contextualized it.

<sup>44</sup> It would become the Chicago Seven after Seale's case was severed from that of the other defendants.

<sup>45</sup> Seale's co-defendants were white antiwar activists Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, Dave Dellinger, Rennie Davis, Tom Hayden, Lee Weiner, and John Froines.

<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, copyright permissions for these images are not currently available. They are, however, easily accessible online at [www.bobbyseale.com](http://www.bobbyseale.com). Specifically, the image of Seale in the electric chair can be found at <<http://www.bobbyseale.com/posters/v4n15-3-15-70.JPG>>, and the image of Seale bound and gagged in the courtroom is visible on the cover of the *Seize the Time* video at <<http://www.bobbyseale.com/html/books.htm>>

<sup>47</sup> See Michele Wallace for an extended discussion of masculinity and the Black Power movement. On the Panthers and women in particular, Elaine Brown, Deborah Gray White, Akua Njeri, Regina Jennings, Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest, and Tracie Matthews, and Kathleen Cleaver provide additional insights (K. Cleaver "Women, Power, and Revolution"). White's critique has some gaps, however, as it relies solely on Elaine Brown's autobiography *A Taste of Power* to denounce the Panthers. She fails to mention Brown's leadership position in the organization, and she cites an event at which Brown was told that "Sisters" must wait for "Brothers" to finish eating before they could be served. While White implies that this was a BPP event, Brown's text presents it as a house party with many US members (E. Brown 109).

Austin and Ogbar's *Black Power* also offers perspectives on the Panthers and feminism based on their own interviews with former Panther women. Njeri, Jennings, LeBlanc-Ernest, and Matthews, for example, confirm the presence of sexist behaviors and attitudes in the Party while remaining positive about their experiences within it.

<sup>48</sup> Fanon's argues that the lumpenproletariat will be the "urban spearhead" of insurrection, a group of "young hooligans" that "constitutes a serious threat to the

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‘security of the town and signifies the irreversible rot and the gangrene eating into the heart of colonial domination’ (Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* 81) He holds that they “devot[e] themselves to the cause like valiant workers” and “believe the power of the gun or the hand grenade is the only way to enter the cities.” Their value, he argues, is their power to over-extend colonial troops who are already engaged in managing rural peasant revolts. The Black Panthers’ urban revolt, coming as it did in the wake of the Southern civil rights movement, closely and explicitly aligned itself with Fanon’s Algerian predictions. Fanon warned, however, that, if the nationalist movement fails to capitalize on the group’s radical potential, the lumpenproletariat “will pitch itself into armed struggle and take part in the conflict, this time on the side of the oppressor.” He attributes this to the lumpenproletariat’s “characteristic flaws” of “lack of political consciousness and ignorance” (*The Eighteenth Brumaire* 87).

Marx is less optimistic about the potential of the lumpenproletariat, describing them as “vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers...in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French term *la bohème*” (75). In his discussion of Louis Bonaparte’s 1851 coup against the government of the French Republic, Marx argues that the counter-revolutionary Louis Bonaparte employed the lumpenproletariat to “play the part of the people” as he established a dictatorship (76).

<sup>49</sup> See Self for extensive description of these processes in Oakland.

<sup>50</sup> See Foner, *Organized Labor*, for a detailed look at the history of race in organized labor.

<sup>51</sup> Shakur was a member of the Panther 21, a group of New York Panthers who were charged in April 1969 with conspiracy to murder police officers and bomb department stores, a police headquarters, several railroad crossings, and the Bronx Botanical Gardens. Most of the group remained in jail until the trial began an entire year later because the Panthers could not afford the \$100,000 bail asked for each member. The twenty-one were Joan Bird, Afeni Shakur, Robert Collier, Dr. Curtis Powell, Ali Bey Hassan, Lumumba Shakur, Lee Berry, Walter Johnson, Dhoruba Bin Wahad, Michael “Cetawayo” Tabor, Alan McKiever, Eddie Josephs, Lonnie Epps, Nathaniel Burns, Larry Mack, Thomas Berry, Richard Harris, Donald Weems, William King, and Zayd Shakur, and one unnamed minor (Austin 284-86, 302).

Shakur was one of those released early on bail in January 1970, and she became a leader in the clearly damaged New York branch during this period (she wrote the article discussed above while out on bail). It was during this period that she became pregnant with her famous son Tupac Shakur. In February 1971, when she was five months pregnant, the judge revoked her bail, and she was again imprisoned until the twenty-one were eventually acquitted of all charges (Guy 109-11).

<sup>52</sup> See Pritchett’s *Brownsville, Brooklyn*; Gordon’s *Why They Couldn’t Wait*; Ritterband’s “Ethnic Power and the Public Schools”; and Podair’s *The Strike that Changed New York* for more on the history of Brownsville. In 1970, when *The Black Panther* article appeared, Brownsville had just emerged from one of its more racially divisive moments. The neighborhood had historically housed a large Jewish population, and by the late 1960s the influx of black and Puerto Rican inhabitants had heightened racial and ethnic tensions. While a strike at the local Beth-El Hospital united black and Puerto Rican

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workers with liberal white supporters, the late '60s witnessed a break in such interracial cooperation (Pritchett). In 1967, the New York City Board of Education experimentally established a measure of community control in several districts, including Brownsville, as a capitulation to African-American demands. For Black Power activists, including the Panthers, community control of schools had long been a rallying cry, and Brownsville appeared to be at least a partial victory (Gordon 4). Racial strife between teachers and parents soon broke out, however. Many of Brownsville's public schools had black or Puerto Rican majorities among students and their parents, while the teachers were largely Jewish (Ritterband 255). The teacher's union became angry about the actions of the new community-controlled School Board, which dismissed or transferred a number of teachers, and a teacher strike broke out in 1968 that split the community largely along racial and ethnic lines.

<sup>53</sup> While white radicals were targeted by the government for imprisonment and surveillance, white organizations encountered far less persecution than the Panthers, the American Indian Movement, or the Puerto Rican *independentistas*. White Weather Underground members like Kathy Boudin, Laura Whitehorn, and David Gilbert did serve lengthy prison sentences (Gilbert remains incarcerated) for their revolutionary forays into armed robbery and property destruction, but the Black Panthers faced even harsher consequences (Foderaro, "Radical Gets 20-Year Term"; New York State; Whitehorn). Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were famously gunned down by Chicago police in their sleep due to the work of an informant; Geronimo "ji Jaga" Pratt served twenty-seven years on a frame-up for murder; Newton and Seale faced numerous charges that could have led to death penalty convictions; Sundiata Acoli remains imprisoned as of 2007 for the 1973 encounter between Black Liberation Army members (former Panthers) that left New Jersey State Trooper Werner Foerster and BLA member Zayd Malik Shakur dead; former Panther Assata Shakur was sentenced to life plus thirty-three years for the same offense (she, however, escaped to Cuba in 1979); and "Lil" Bobby Hutton was shot and killed in a raid by police on a Panther house, to name only a few. These prisoners and victims of the US government and prison system marked the prison system's role in the construction of the working classes. The more the working-class and "lumpenproletariat" black population entered the prison system, the less opportunity they had to organize against the racist and imperialist system.

<sup>54</sup> In the late 1960s, it wasn't simply the streets that were absorbing the "Lumpen"—it was also the military, which drew in and drafted a disproportionate number of black recruits for the most dangerous positions. As the Vietnam War escalated in 1965-66, approximately 21% of US casualties were African-Americans, though the percentage of African-Americans in the total population at the time was only 11% (Binkin, et al 76). Popular dissent over this racial disparity led the military to restructure Vietnam combat assignments to reflect the general population, and casualties for blacks reverted to 11.5% of the total by 1969 (Segal and Segal 21-22; Binkin, et al 76). Today, however, the problem persists. In 2002, African-Americans accounted for 22% of the armed forces' enlisted as compared to 13% of the overall American population (Segal and Segal 21-22).

Unlike attacks on police officers or landlords, the military offered the Panthers the opportunity to attack capitalism more directly. The term "military-industrial complex" had gained currency in the 1960s among activists who stressed that the Cold War and the

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war in Vietnam were not attempts to foster democracy. Instead, American manufacturers produced and promoted armor and weaponry, from the atomic bomb to Agent Orange, as a means of increasing profits. American soldiers, then, were the dispensable human material of the military-industrial complex. They gave their lives for the spread of “democracy” and the wealth of American corporations. Unlike Marx’s original conception of the “lumpenproletariat,” those caught up in the military-industrial machine had a life-and-death interest in the relations of production.

<sup>54</sup> See United States Congressional hearings testimony for controversies concerning whether or not the Panthers used threats of violence to solicit donations for their community service projects.

<sup>55</sup> This should not suggest that working for the Panthers could not also be alienating. See Austin 273-284 for elaboration on Panthers’ daily activities.

<sup>56</sup> See United States Congressional hearings testimony for controversies concerning whether or not the Panthers used threats of violence to solicit donations for their community service projects.

<sup>57</sup> The White Panthers formed in 1968 to offer white solidarity to the Panthers in response to Huey Newton’s call for white anti-racist organizing (Hale). The Gray Panthers grew out of the Consultation of Older and Younger Adults for Social Change, which formed in 1970 to advocate for retirees. They adopted the name Gray Panthers after being playfully referred to as such by a New York talk show producer (“Gray Panthers’ History”).

*The League of Revolutionary Black Workers Brings Back the Industrial Jungle*

“We can hang bullets around our necks and wear all kinds of dashikis, but that’s not going to bring about an ultimate end to oppression,” declared Ken Cockrel at a 1970 anti-repression conference (Cockrel 89).<sup>1</sup> A Detroit lawyer and a central figure in Detroit’s League of Revolutionary Black Workers [LRBW], Cockrel intended this comment as a means of distancing himself from the other members of his panel: Emory Douglas of the Black Panther Party [BPP] and Robert Williams of the Republic of New Afrika [RNA]. Just as the BPP’s Linda Harrison had rejected cultural nationalists for believing “that a buba makes a slave a man,” Cockrel now used the same tactic to denounce the Panthers (Harrison 151).<sup>2</sup> The ritual of dissociating oneself from style was a way of insisting on the real content of activist work. Just as many Panthers changed their names, grew afros, or wore bubas, however, many LRBW members hung bullets around their necks and wore dashikis. Neither organization adopted such accoutrements at the expense of political action. Although labor historian and activist John Bracey describes the LRBW as non-theatrical, I maintain that the League skillfully manipulated language and imagery in its array of publications, its wildcat strikes, and its community activist ventures (79).<sup>3</sup> It didn’t foster mythical heroes or attract the media attention that the Panthers did, but the League, too, depended on performance and metaphor as revolutionary tactics. In particular, by stressing the rhetoric of workers, factories, and industry in its publications, the League insisted that the United States was *not* a post-industrial world, as the Panther focus on the lumpenproletariat seemed to suggest. In 1968, 39.9% of Detroit’s laborers worked in manufacturing, and by 1970 African



Americans constituted 43.7% of the city's population, making them a major source of industrial labor (Widick 211; Geschwender, *Class, Race* 58). Unlike the Panthers, who saw black Americans as a colony within the United States, the League believed that African Americans were at the center of capitalist production. If the Panthers joined primitive and industrial metaphors when they envisioned the inner-city landscape as a post-industrial colony, the LRBW identified the factory as a site of racially charged primitivist tropes and "jungle" warfare.

The League of Revolutionary Black Workers was an organization that sponsored alternative union movements in Detroit's auto factories in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Beginning with the Detroit Revolutionary Union Movement [DRUM] in Dodge's Hamtramck Assembly Plant in 1968, a group of black activists and auto workers began organizing against plant management and union bureaucracy. These activists claimed that the United Auto Workers [UAW] protected the interests of white workers and that plant management gave black workers the most miserable and low-paying jobs. By starting black nationalist union movements in factories across Detroit and by supplementing this work with community organizations, bookstores, and publishing outfits, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers aimed to build a revolutionary base among black workers that would spread to the larger black community. Facing internal strife, the organization suffered a debilitating split in 1971, and by January of 1972 the League collapsed (Georgakas and Surkin 164).

This chapter will demonstrate how the LRBW used its array of publications to identify the black industrial worker as the center of revolutionary resistance in the "industrial jungle." Analyses of its publications will reveal how, just as many whites and

blacks were fascinated by the “primitive,” attributing both frightening and romantic traits to it, the League and its revolutionary allies were drawn to the “industrial” as a site of both beauty and fear. Diego Rivera’s renowned mural *Detroit Industry* in the Detroit Institute of Arts, which depicted 1930s Ford workers producing automobiles amidst a tangle of industrial machinery and contrasting symbols of natural life and reproduction, had allowed Detroiters to see the auto factory as a stunning work of art. Like the League decades after him, Rivera depicted auto production as fiery and hazardous at the same time that he celebrated the worker as the hero of its intricate modern spectacle. For Detroit radicals, the auto worker held a privileged social position both because of his role in modern production and because of the danger and exploitation he faced in fulfilling it.

The League’s fascination with the factory space accompanied an interest in the same primitivist metaphors that guided the Panthers and cultural nationalist movements. Through these images, I will argue, the LRBW distinguished its *black* revolutionary union movement from the labor movement’s often racist past while welcoming the aggression and confrontation that the “primitive” permitted. In place of the bureaucratic union’s cooperative labor relations, the League envisioned a broad African-American movement extending quietly through factories, communities, and schools, united by metaphors of militancy and cultural nationalism if not by organizational affiliation. Thus, although members saw the *worker* as the central revolutionary actor, under League direction this term became slippery. Just as the city of Detroit associated itself wholeheartedly with auto production, the League often identified auto *workers* with Detroit’s entire black community, including the large segment not employed in factories. Through this flexible definition, the LRBW developed a strategy that permitted members

to understand the relationship between African-American identity, industrial capitalism, and black nationalism.

This picture of a black radical movement, however, relied upon the masculinist, heteronormative values that were prevalent in mainstream culture at the time. When the League vaunted conflict between workers and management, it defined such combat in the terms of heterosexual black masculinity. In League newsletters, fellow black workers who did not follow the League's radicalism were defined as homosexuals and traitors to blackness. Such depictions were rooted in the assumption that sexual subservience, usually associated with women, meant a betrayal of solidarity. If the dominant American culture had historically associated black women with promiscuity and white women with protected purity, the League collapsed these tropes by depicting both white and black female opponents as "whores" and "bitches." Their own female members, on the other hand, rarely made any appearance in League publications. Despite the contributions of many women, whether community members, wives of workers, or women workers, the League's ideal revolutionary auto worker was male and heterosexual.

Unlike the Black Panthers, who complicated their primitivist tropes with newspaper text, the League thrived upon broad, simplified imagery. We see this reflected in the LRBW's heavy-handed invocations of violence, gender, and sexuality. I argue, however, that something deeper underlies the organization's generic imagery and often clichéd poetry. By examining League poetry and reflecting on the League's larger connections in the Black Arts Movement, I will demonstrate how the group took ownership over the Black Arts Movement project of art for and by the people. By imitating Black Arts Movement poetic forms and black literary traditions, the League's

poets asked workers to see political language and poetic language as intertwined. The League generated literal poetic material for T.V. Reed's "poetics of social movements," and this poetry helped readers look more critically at the organization's political metaphors.

In order to illustrate these trends in LRBW discourse, I will examine the organization's publications, including in-plant newsletters, community newspapers, flyers, handbills, and organizational documents. Of these texts, four primary publications deserve special description. *ELRUM* and *DRUM* were the in-plant newsletters designed for two of the League's subsidiaries: the Eldon Revolutionary Union Movement and the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, respectively. Largely written by and distributed to workers (with the help of League staffers and leaders), these publications appeared weekly to alert workers to local union and plant news. They were printed on folded, double-sided 8 ½"x11" sheets. The *Inner-City Voice* [ICV] and the 1968-69 *South End*, on the other hand, acted as the LRBW's public newspapers, printed on larger newsprint and including fifteen to twenty-five pages of content. Although these newspapers were also distributed at factory gates, they garnered a wider audience of black community members, students, and local radicals.<sup>4</sup>

### **DRUM and the Little RUMs**

Before elaborating on the League's use of industrial and primitive metaphors, we first need a clearer understanding of the organization itself. Although I use the term "League of Revolutionary Black Workers" throughout as shorthand, the League was actually a collection of organizations that was founded in June 1969 to manage several already existing black nationalist workers' groups in Detroit (Georgakas and Surkin 84).

Ironically, the first such grouping, the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement [DRUM], emerged from a wildcat led primarily by white workers. On May 2, 1968, a speed-up in the assembly line at Hamtramck Assembly Plant (commonly known as Dodge Main) angered workers on the afternoon shift (24).<sup>5</sup> According to General Baker, a future leader of the LRBW who was then an auto worker in the plant, a set of mostly white workers responded to the speed-up by declaring that they wouldn't return to work after lunch.<sup>6</sup> Baker and his African-American friends assumed their co-workers were bluffing, so they were surprised when they found a picket line at the factory gates after lunch. Eager to take action, Baker and his companions joined in, and the workers successfully shut down the plant for four days, gaining the support of approximately 4,000 workers (Baker; Geschwender, "The League" 6). Although the action was interracial and initiated by whites, discipline disproportionately affected black participants. Of ten workers suspended for thirty days, nine were black ("Black Workers Uprising" 22). More troubling, seven workers, five of whom were African American, received termination notices. Although five of the seven eventually regained their jobs, General Baker and Bennie Tate, both African Americans and radicals, remained blacklisted (Geschwender, *Class, Race* 89).

Inspired by a demonstration of radicalism by fellow workers but angry about the racist distribution of punishment, Baker and nine others gathered to form the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement [DRUM] (H.A. Thompson 110). At first, the organization was little more than a newsletter of the same name, released every Tuesday and handed out at the factory gates exclusively to African-American workers (Baker). Bent on exposing poor working conditions in addition to management and union racism,

the newsletter alienated some whites and older African Americans but mobilized a sector of young black workers. Because auto plants in the 1960s had hired many young African Americans to replace a retiring white workforce, it was a propitious time for such activism.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, as Baker notes, the low seniority level of young black workers meant that they tended to be grouped together on the afternoon shift, increasing their contact with one another and their ability to act as a unified force.

Buoyed by positive responses from this cohort of young workers, DRUM decided to take action. Its first step, focused more on community race relations than on working conditions, was to call for a boycott of bars located outside the factory gates with the demand that they begin hiring African Americans. To the members' surprise, DRUM quickly won the battle, and with this victory in hand it turned to the factory, leading a second wildcat in July that kept about 70% of black workers out of the plant (Georgakas and Surkin 46; Ahmad, *The League* 8; Foner, *Organized Labor* 414). Although participants on the picket line did not approach white workers, some whites nonetheless honored the strike, and the walkout lasted two days. During this time, picketers left the plant on two occasions: to confront management at corporate headquarters and to take on the union at United Auto Workers [UAW] Local 3 headquarters.

Both Chrysler and UAW Local 3, DRUM argued, were responsible for the plight of black workers at Dodge Main, and in return the organization demanded specific concessions from each. From the corporation it requested fifty black foremen, ten black general foremen, three black superintendents, a black plant manager, black doctors and nurses, 50% black plant guards, amnesty for protesters, return of previously fired protesters, equal wages for whites and blacks, and an African American on Chrysler's

board of directors. From the union it insisted upon 50% black representation on the UAW International Executive Board and international staff, an African-American president, one black vice president, open admission for African Americans to skilled trades and apprenticeships, a revision of the grievance procedure, better safety protections, guards against speed ups, the recognition of DRUM as the official voice of black workers, a decrease in union dues, UAW investment but not interference in the black community, termination of the check-off system of union dues, an end to UAW cooperation with the government, and a general strike aimed to end the Vietnam War (“DRUM Demands;” “DRUM’s Program”).

These militant demands, which included both manageable local tasks and grand-scale utopian ones, motivated fellow workers in Detroit and around the country, and a host of other “RUMs” emerged in the following years. ELRUM, the Eldon Revolutionary Union Movement, started its own newsletter in November 1968, and it would soon become a larger and more promising movement than DRUM. As the only gear and axle plant in Chrysler’s entire assembly, Detroit’s Eldon Avenue factory held leverage over the entire production process—and both workers and League organizers were well aware of how a strike at Eldon could potentially cripple the Chrysler giant. Sensing the power of the overall movement, smaller RUMs multiplied in the Detroit area: Ford’s River Rouge produced FRUM, Jefferson Avenue formed a JARUM, Mack Avenue a MARUM, Cadillac’s Fleetwood plant a CADRUM, the Dodge Truck factory a DRUM II (or DTRUM), and the Mound Road Engine Plant a MERUM. Outside the auto industry, the African-American workers at United Parcel Service established an UPRUM, health

workers created an HRUM, and the Detroit News formed a NEWRUM (Georgakas and Surkin 82-85).

Such a proliferation prompted the original DRUM organizers to form the League of Revolutionary Black Workers as an umbrella organization in 1969, installing a seven-man executive board of Luke Tripp, Chuck Wooten, General Baker, Mike Hamlin, Ken Cockrel, John Watson, and John Williams. Bound together by common workplace experiences and a history in Detroit student, civil rights, and black power activism, the LRBW leaders both preceded DRUM and emerged to support it. In 1967, an enlarged version of the LRBW executive board had begun the *Inner-City Voice* [ICV], a monthly radical newspaper directed at Detroit's black community (Georgakas and Surkin 84; Ahmad, *The League* 5).<sup>8</sup> Inspired by Robert F. Williams's and Malcolm X's critiques of the civil rights movement but also versed in Marxist ideology from the Revolutionary Action Movement [RAM], Socialist Workers Party forums, and contacts with Detroit's leftist community, the *ICV* writers and editors envisioned their role as part of a workers' movement before the May 2, 1968 wildcat that founded DRUM. While the wildcat might have directly led to the formation of DRUM, the *ICV* group was poised to grasp any opportunity for a worker-led movement that might arise. And despite the fact that it had preceded DRUM and the LRBW, *Inner-City Voice* editors quickly re-named the paper the "organ of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers."

Between the 1967 founding of the *Inner-City Voice* and the 1971 split that led to the League's slow demise, the seven-man executive board and a growing list of allies built a giant network of activist projects. In addition to the host of RUMs, the League oversaw high school organizing, a bookstore, a publishing outfit, a press, a filmmaking



collective, and a fundraising effort known as the International Black Appeal. Beyond these efforts, League members took part in a variety of unaffiliated organizations such as the West Central Organization (which organized for community control of schools), the North Woodward Interfaith Organization, and the Detroit branch of the Black Panther Party (Geschwender, “The League” 10). Nearly every activity the League sponsored had its own publication. *ICV* served as a public mouthpiece for the League, each RUM produced a regular newsletter focused on specific plant news, and high school students published the *Black Student Voice* with the help of adult League members Mike Hamlin and Glanton Dowdell (Ahmad, *The League* 14). Undeterred by the reluctance of printers to produce the *ICV*, in 1968 the League saved its public newspaper by co-opting the Wayne State University student paper, *The South End*. In the fall of 1968, *ICV* editor John Watson signed up for classes and ran for editor of the student newspaper. Having stacked the student committee assigned to choose the editor with sympathetic faces, the League succeeded in electing Watson as editor of the 1968-69 *South End*. There, according to Georgakas and Surkin, he drew a salary of \$2400, worked with a budget of \$100,000, and hired several League members as staffers. For the eight months of his editorial tenure, *The South End* replaced *ICV* as the League’s official publication, mixing workplace news with announcements for sorority functions and reports on Wayne State athletics (Georgakas and Surkin 55).

The broad range of League activities demanded enormous financial and human commitments, and disputes arose on the executive body between those who wanted to maintain a broad community focus and those who prioritized factory work. This debate, which ultimately led to the 1971 resignation of the community-focused faction (Hamlin,

Cockrel, and Watson), reflects the importance of the League's relationship to workers, the "industrial," and the factory (Georgakas and Surkin 164).

### **Civilizing the Industrial Jungle**

The factory became a source of black power for the League only through the cultural history of terms that combined connotations of race, barbarism, and industrial settings, such as "industrial jungle," "urban jungle" and "concrete jungle." The most common of the three is "urban jungle," which the *Oxford English Dictionary* dates to a 1926 *New York Times* article that described, in a tongue-in-cheek manner, the dangers of the urban space for a migrant from the country. At the height of the jazz age and the modernist primitivist moment in aesthetics, author Miriam Beard used the term to reveal the very nature of a city—mysterious, frightening, full of strange machinery—and to reference the ways that trendy white youth had begun to appropriate blackness and the "primitive." She refers to the "speed and jazz of modern life," limbs aching from the Charleston, and fashionable women who "wear the slave bracelets and the abbreviated skirts whose fashion was set by the Congo long before Paris ever heard of it." The phrase "urban jungle," then, arose out of the same complications between race, modernism, and urban chic that haunted modernist art. It reflected desire as well as fear, and it suggested that the urban space itself—not simply the urban ghetto—deserved the title "jungle."

While this 1920s use of "urban jungle" elicited positive cultural connotations of the jazz age for young urban hipsters, the phrase has since descended into more negative economic and racial associations. Today, "urban jungle" and "concrete jungle" refer to an oppressive urban condition (sometimes associated with the "capitalist rat race") or a depressed urban community populated largely by people of color. Bob Marley's song

“Concrete Jungle,” released with The Wailers on the 1973 album *Catch a Fire*, bemoans the distinction between the “sweet life” and the “concrete jungle / where the living is harder.” As Marley’s song indicates, the term has lost the romantic edge that Miriam Beard played upon, largely invoking fear and mistrust on the part of whites and either despair or defiance among those who feel that they live in the midst of this “jungle.” By the 1960s, when the League of Revolutionary Black Workers began linking urbanity, industry, and primitivism together, both senses of the phrase had some currency in popular discourse, although the negative connotations were quickly winning the day.

“Industrial jungle,” on the other hand, a term that described the Black Panther’s lair in Marvel’s 1966 comic book, is not common enough to make the *OED*. Like “urban jungle,” it sometimes refers to a ghetto and, thus, can invoke racist primitivism. A 1962 fight in Westport over zoning, for instance, elicited this comment from a white Westport resident: “we commute and pay the premiums to escape the congested commercial industrial jungles that border major cities. [ . . . ] We all bought at a fancy price to get a nice home in a sophisticated community” (Parke). This speaker employs the industrial jungle as an all-purpose descriptor for a working-class inner-city space that white, middle-class homeowners want to avoid. It is undesirable and jungle-like because it mixes residential and commercial spaces, because it is economically poor, and, presumably, because it is not all white.

The other history of the phrase “industrial jungle,” however, arises from the labor movement. In 1906, Upton Sinclair used the term “jungle” to describe the horrific working conditions of Chicago’s meatpacking industry, and by the 1930s labor unions, especially garment worker unions in New York, had adopted the term as an organizing

tool that could function in two ways: as an illustration of working conditions or as a reference to labor relations without union mediation. In the first case, the industrial jungle substituted for the word “sweatshop,” a term also most common in the garment industry. A 1932 *New York Times* article used this meaning of the phrase when it cited an official from the New York Clothing Manufacturers Exchange: ““think well before you permit a return of long hours of labor for a reduced number of workers...; a return of competitive wage-cutting with 1933 sweatshop earnings as a goal; [ . . . ]; a return to the industrial jungle” (“Favorable Report”). This “industrial jungle” signified the presumably miserable, “primitive” life that Western culture had learned to overcome.

The second meaning of the term implied that the “industrial jungle” emerged when labor and management battled one another openly, without the “civilized” process of union grievance procedures or sanctioned strikes. This meaning appears in a 1947 *New York Times* article that warns readers about the consequences of decreased funding to the National Labor Relations Board [NLRB]: “strikes would undoubtedly increase, for in the absence of peaceful procedures the unions would resort ‘to the law of the industrial jungle’” (Stark). Similarly, in 1959, NLRB chairman Boyd Leedom deplored the “primordial” behavior of unions that used “goon tactics, corruption, and the indiscriminate use of economic muscle.” In contrast, he praised the leaders of two more upright garment worker unions “as the architects of stability in what would otherwise be an industrial jungle” (Raskin). Labor unions and government officials, then, used the “industrial jungle” to describe a state of competitive chaos.

Unions were also guilty of invoking racist assumptions when they employed the phrase. In the early twentieth century, organized labor had struggled to overcome racial

prejudice, and its efforts had been hampered by the corporate use of racism to break strikes by employing African Americans as “scabs.” In union rhetoric, the phrase “industrial jungle” suggested that if majority-white unions did not manage employer-employee relations, factories would not only revert to dangerous working conditions—they would also become increasingly non-white. In the garment industry, where the expression “industrial jungle” was most prevalent, African-American workers did not play a primary role, but racial tensions existed between the mostly immigrant ethnic groups represented: Jewish, Italian, Russian, and Chinese women. Moreover, despite the fact that black women were underrepresented in the garment industry, they appeared as strikebreakers at numerous times during the first half of the twentieth century (Whatley 534-5). Consequently, the industrial jungle idiom could signal not only a threat to *worker* power but also a threat to white union power.

When the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and its affiliated organizations produced a blend of “industrial” and “primitive” metaphors and images beginning in 1968, then, they responded to notions of the urban and industrial jungles that had wound their way through modernist primitivism, “white flight” expressions of racism, and the white-dominated labor movement. The League’s rhetorical project revealed the exploitation and racism at the center of industrial capitalism. By traveling into the “jungle” of the shop floor as well as the “jungle” metaphors of black nationalism,<sup>9</sup> the League both revealed the “primitive” nature of capitalist exploitation (as the Panthers had) *and* refused to accept the “civilized” relations between union and industry as a solution.

## **Already an Auto Worker**

The League eventually embraced the notion of the “industrial jungle” because it allowed members to combine traditional Marxist notions of worker-led resistance with the Afrocentric imagery and rhetoric of 1960s black nationalism. The League’s leadership saw the factory as the key strategic site of resistance. Consequently, they needed to cultivate a relationship to industry. As the phrases “industrial jungle” and “urban jungle” often collapsed the distinction between urban locations and industrial locations, however, so did the League elide the roles of the urban African-American in Detroit and the auto worker. They claimed to be the League of Revolutionary Black *Workers*, but many of the League’s executive board had no firm connections to Detroit’s industrial workplaces. Hamlin, Tripp, Wooten, and Baker had all been auto workers at one time, but by the time of DRUM’s first wildcat, only Wooten and Baker worked in this capacity, and Wooten alone held this status after Baker’s swift termination.

The entire board had come from working class backgrounds, largely as immigrants or the children of immigrants from the South. They had seen parents struggle with unemployment or labor as domestics, auto workers, janitors, and postal workers (Geschwender, *Class, Race* 171-75). Some went on to hold working-class jobs. Watson met Cockrel and Hamlin, for example, when the trio worked together in the delivery department of the *Detroit News* (Geschwender, *Class, Race* 171). Cockrel didn’t remain in this working-class position for long, however. In 1967 he graduated from law school and became the League’s resident attorney—as well as one of the most celebrated and controversial lawyers in Detroit (Mast 86). Although the other executive members did not take professional jobs as Cockrel did, many of them attended or graduated from college

at Detroit's Wayne State University, where they absorbed literature and politics while becoming involved in activism and radical study groups. At Wayne State, Watson, Williams, Baker, and Tripp participated in the student group UHURU, and it was their connection as classmates rather than fellow workers that launched them on their activist careers.

The LRBW executive board, then, gathered educated men (no women) of working-class backgrounds, united more by their shared radicalism than a common history of auto work. In the years of the League's peak, some earned paychecks from the LRBW, others worked in auto plants, some were unemployed, and the remainder held a variety of working-class or professional jobs. We need not see this assortment of occupations as a reason to condemn the League for being "inauthentic" or composed of "outside agitators" who advanced their political ideologies by taking advantage of auto workers. Such claims have often been used to denounce activists in factories or to scare working-class people away from radical politics. Instead, the relationship between League leadership and the factories underscores the complicated mix of identities that guided the LRBW. Members were students, working-class people, full-time activists, and professionals all at once. They shifted from one identity to another or claimed more than one simultaneously.

In a 2007 interview, General Baker dates the group's identification with the working classes to the Detroit Rebellion of 1967, an event that the *ICV* referred to as the "general strike of '67" (Georgakas and Surkin 20). This moment, Baker insists, demonstrated the key economic position of the black auto worker:

They [the government] imposed curfews or what we called martial law. If you got sick you couldn't go to the hospital, if you got hungry you couldn't get nothing to

eat, but if you had a badge for Ford, Chrysler, or GM [General Motors], you could get through all these police lines to take your ass to work. So that was a real learning experience for us because we surmised that the only place that black people had any power in the society was at the point of production. So therefore it didn't make sense for us to keep knocking ourselves over the head working in the community when the only power that the powers that be recognized we had was at the point of production, and that's why we turned our efforts toward organizing in the factory.<sup>10</sup>

When I asked Baker whether he sought a job in an auto factory in order to organize workers, however, as many socialists did at the time, he insisted that he was *already* an auto worker:

If you grew up in the city of Detroit in the '60s you were going to go to one of the auto plants, so we used to call it baptism. I got baptized at the Ford Rouge at the Dearborn Stamping Plant in 1963. So I was already in an auto factory as I was taking classes at Wayne State. [. . .] I didn't go in there to organize, I went in there to live. (Baker)

Baker began life as an auto worker, then, around the same time he founded UHURU at Wayne State; when he says that he went into the auto plant to *live*, he disturbs the typical distinction between student and worker activism. His status as a student, Baker suggests, depended upon his income as an auto worker. The two were intertwined, and just as the factory was essential to capitalist Detroit, so was it essential to his identity as a black Detroitier. He was *baptized* into auto work, entering a community of workers into which he had been born. As his father had been an auto worker, so would he—his status, as he saw it, was predestined (Mast 305).

When the *ICV* described the Great Rebellion as a “general strike,” it performed a similar analysis. In some ways, the Rebellion actually *did* function as a strike. Many auto workers participated in looting and showdowns with police, and when Baker was arrested for violation of curfew, he noted that his “cell block at Ionia State Penitentiary looked like the assembly line.” When he returned to work fifteen days later, he commented that



“the assembly line still wasn’t running at full tilt because there were so many people still incarcerated” (Baker). A survey sponsored at the time by the Detroit Urban League did not reveal the number of rebellion participants who were auto workers, but it did support Baker’s contention that rioters came from all income and education brackets. According to the survey, rioters took action (as workers might) in response to specific grievances: police brutality, poor living conditions, and the lack of jobs (Meyer 1-8).

But despite the League’s hopes and claims, the Rebellion was obviously *not* an organized general strike. By labeling it a strike, the League muddled the definition of “worker.” On the one hand, the League asked the entire community to identify as industrial workers. The whole black community, this phrase suggested, contributed to capitalist production, and a rebellion in the black community could bring Detroit to a halt just as a walkout of black workers could immobilize a factory. On the other hand, Baker made a distinction between workers and non-workers in the riot, suggesting that the majority of participants did *not* wear GM or Ford badges that allowed them to pass through the police lines.

This complicated relationship between workers, the community, and students was prominent in LRBW language. Although Marxists have always privileged the industrial worker as the key to revolution, the League’s fusion of Marxism and black nationalism, an ideology which former member Akbar Ahmad notes was loose and eclectic among rank-and-file members, celebrated workers as the center of an ideological program and insisted that to be black in America *was* to be a worker. As Ken Cockrel emphasized:

We do not simply define workers in the orthodox sense of those who toil laboriously with their hands over a lathe, or on the line, or in the trim shop, or in the frame plant, or in the foundry. We say that all people who don’t own, rule and

benefit from decisions which are made by those who own and rule are workers.  
(Cockrel 87)

References to the “PLANTation” in *DRUM* and *ELRUM* reminded auto workers that, like their ancestors, their labor had built American wealth (Tripp 3). This was true, according to Cockrel, whether they worked on plantations, in auto plants, in employers’ homes, in service industries, or even if they didn’t “work” at all—if they, that is, worked within the home or struggled with unemployment. For women in the League, many of whom did not work in the majority-male auto industry, this point bore particular weight. Former League activist Marian Kramer recalls women reminding male comrades that “all those men got to come back into the community; they live somewhere. We’ve got to be organizing in both places” (Mast 104). In her reading, “community” activism did not differ fundamentally from workplace activism—it simply included the context of family and social life in her interpretation of the factory space.

The League’s relationships with high school and college students further demonstrate the tension in LRBW rhetoric between privileged and universal worker status. Although the League sponsored activism in high schools that advocated for African-American studies curricula and student power, students also played a crucial role in factory organizing. Because auto workers could be fired for picketing during wildcat strikes or targeted as radicals for distributing literature outside the plant gates, these tasks fell to non-workers, largely high school and college students (Geschwender and Jeffries 141). Youth performed the roles of strikers by walking the picket line, making the bodies of workers and non-workers interchangeable. Standing at the threshold of the plant, students also tested the boundaries between student and worker status in preparation for their own presumed “baptism.” A 1969 League handbill specifically addressed black

students as “pre-workers” and asked them to identify with their elders: “the majority of black fathers in the city of Detroit are factory workers they work 8 to 10 hours a day—5 or 6 days a week in order to feed clothe and shelter black students. [. . .] Helping workers, students can forge bonds with parents because our problems are the same” (Detroit Revolutionary Movements, Box 1, Folder 1-21). In an era when student activism had fostered distrust for “anyone over thirty,” the League asked students to see parents and workers as revolutionary allies.

Despite such positive relationships, League language was not always so welcoming to students. In 1968, when John Watson took over the editor’s position at Wayne State University’s newspaper, the League expressed public disdain for its student audience. LRBW members appropriated some of the paper’s staff positions, distributed thousands of newspapers off campus at factories or in the black community, and printed a newspaper that carried the banner “One Class-Conscious Worker is Worth 100 Students.” According to Baker, *The South End* takeover did not aim to influence Wayne State students either positively or negatively—it was simply a financial tactic. Unable to find a local printer for the *Inner-City Voice* because of its radical content, *The South End* offered the League access to free equipment, labor, funds, and distribution. On a concrete level, the LRBW insisted that public universities belonged to the community rather than simply to students and faculty (Georgakas and Surkin 55). If the community could fall into the category of workers, then workers could also overlap with the “public” in the “public university.”<sup>11</sup>

The League’s aggressive attitudes toward students did not destroy the possibilities for student-worker cooperation at Wayne State. Although the League may have co-opted

*The South End* with its own goals in mind, students, faculty, and alumni also molded the paper. With the exception of Watson and a few League staffers, the majority of reporters were Wayne State students who honed their journalistic skills not only on League stories but also on an array of student and activist concerns. Sports, sorority, and fraternity reports retained prominence in the paper, appearing alongside discussions of antiwar protests and wildcat strikes. And while the paper's masthead and its radical content certainly provoked controversy on campus, it did not prevent students, faculty, or alumni from reading it or participating in discussion about it. In a letter to the editor, for instance, a professor mocked the masthead for its "Marxematics," offering alternate equations such as "1S=1 C.C.W," a suggestion supposedly "submitted by a sizeable Marcusian minority" and "One of anything=100 students," "submitted by renegade rightist with 50 years of teaching experience" (*The South End* 28 Feb. 1969: 4). This letter-writer deflated the self-importance of the masthead's slogan and, in doing so, unknowingly highlighted the League's real relationships to students, which were more complicated than the equation on the masthead suggested. In fact, the students who worked for *The South End*, who distributed *DRUM* and *ELRUM* or who picketed at wildcats, were key assets of the organization. The masthead rhetorically separated students from workers, but in reality the League asked both groups to see themselves as part of a larger community. During the 1968-69 school year, auto workers regularly received a student newspaper, full of announcements for campus lectures and sporting events as well as reports on political events, and students supplemented their campus knowledge with the details of workplace grievances and negotiations. Many were no doubt angry about the banner's anti-student stance, but others saw it as an exhortation to continue their political work after college in

the workplace, a process of “industrialization” that will be analyzed more fully in the next chapter.

While sentiments of solidarity might value the League’s more expansive understanding of the term “worker” over the definition that rejected and demeaned students, the expanded term had real as well as rhetorical consequences, not all of which were positive. Students and community members did offer concrete help to the League, but they also scattered the organization’s focus in a variety of directions. Frustrated that its members were spreading themselves too thin and becoming lost in an organizational maze, Baker and Wooten led a faction of the LRBW that hoped to focus the group’s energy primarily on in-plant organizing. Hamlin, Cockrel, and Watson, on the other hand, insisted that workers needed a broad network of African-American radicalism to support them and that building such a structure should be a top priority. In each case, the understanding of the term “worker” was strategic. The expansion of the definition of “worker” made sense as a way of uniting black nationalism and Marxism, but it could not generate the funds or the human time necessary to maintain and build such a large network.

### **Man vs. Machine**

The League’s glorification of workers, whether broadly or rigidly defined, followed Marxist and socialist ideologies that privileged the proletariat as the vanguard of the revolution. The black worker, however, had a different history than Marx’s worker, who had social status as *human* despite her exploitation. As the League would illustrate, the black auto worker also had a different relationship to the plant’s machinery than his white co-workers. At a time when white workers feared that machines could replace their

jobs through automation, many black workers felt that they were expected to *become* machines. As General Baker commented, “I wish like hell I would have had a robot to help with my damn job cause I worked 40 yrs at that job, almost, [doing] the work human beings shouldn’t have done” (Baker).<sup>12</sup> Because of such sentiments, *DRUM* and *ELRUM* insisted that automation posed little threat to black workers. A machine may put a highly-paid white worker out of a job, their texts suggested, but black workers were paid so little that they were actually *more* cost-efficient than machines. As Mike Hamlin remarked, “at Ford, labor costs them fifty-eight dollars per unit on a Falcon! Fifty-eight dollars per unit is much cheaper than spending all that money in buying machines necessary to fully automate the plant” (Hamlin, *Fight on to Victory* 9).

The League coined a term to describe how this phenomenon affected black workers: “niggermentation.” On an etymological level, the League insisted that the auto plant was an extension of the slave plantation, and “niggermentation” referenced what the League saw as white fears of “automation.” In League texts, the term described the process of speed-up that often positioned one African American on a job that had once occupied two white workers. When a worker, either black or white, was driven from his job due to an unreasonable speed-up, his replacement would learn the new speed, never knowing that he was doing the work a previous worker had refused to perform. Because young employees were increasingly African American, this procedure affected black workers disproportionately. *The General Policy Statement and Labor Program of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers*, which was printed as a booklet as well as in *ICV* installments, recorded the following case: “At the Ford engine plant [. . .] a young brother was producing over 120 units an hour on a job previously worked by two men at a pace

of 70 units an hour; the previous men had exercised seniority to get off the job because it was too strenuous” (*General Policy Statement* 25). By naming a common grievance “niggermentation” and referring to the “PLANTation,” the League asked workers to see workplace abuses within the history of slavery’s dehumanization. It presented black workers not as an industrial labor force but as industrial *material* and stressed that racism was built into the structure of auto production.

The League illustrated the interaction between black men, industry, and machines on the back cover of the *ICV*, which regularly featured a drawing of a John Henry figure holding a hammer and displaying his powerful arm. The black folklore hero was known for blasting his way through a mountain tunnel in a race with a machine and, after winning, falling to the ground dead. Like John Henry, black auto workers were asked to perform tasks at high speed to increase production, and it mattered little to corporations whether such exertion came at a cost. The League adopted Henry as a defining myth because he was an industrial hero as well as a victim. The story exudes a sense of pride that he could beat the machine. In the League’s John Henry image, the man’s face is obscured, and above him is the exhortation to “Join the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.” As a result, the John Henry figure appears as a generic representation of the black worker. The League suggested that *all* black workers played Henry’s dual role of industrial hero and victim. This image also played into some of the League’s more problematic uses of imagery, however, as it defined the black worker through individual masculinity, emphasizing his bulging bicep and strong hands over his face or tool. Henry was capable of solo resistance, with or without the aid of his co-workers, and this implication defied the League’s own emphasis on collective action.

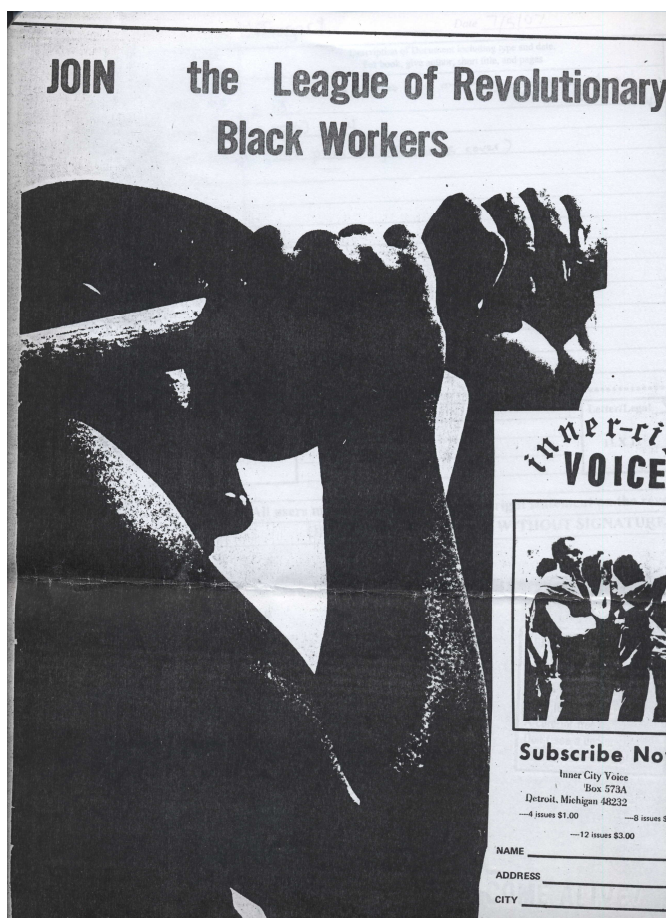


Fig. 4. John Henry in the ICV (*Inner City Voice* 2.1: 20)

In combination with the term “niggermation,” however, the John Henry image succeeded in presenting the transformation of worker into machine as a product of racism as well as capitalism. This claim came as no surprise to readers of *DRUM* and *ELRUM*, who had long experienced the racism of Detroit’s auto industry, beginning with Ford’s decision to hire black workers to frustrate white workers’ unionization efforts (Geschwender, *Class, Race* 37). By the 1960s,

African Americans had been given the most dangerous, difficult, and unpleasant jobs for some time, and they watched in frustration as white co-workers quickly moved into more desirable positions. In 1966, blacks made up 13.6% of all auto workers in the country, and some plants had much higher concentrations, including *DRUM*’s Dodge Main, whose population by 1960 was 45% black (Fujita 62; United States Commission on Civil Rights 63). Within the factory, African Americans constituted 27.6% of all “laborers” and 20.2% of all assembly line “operatives” but only 1.2% of “officials and managers,” 0.6% of “professionals,” and 1.2% of “technicians” (Fujita 59; Northrup 36). At Dodge



Main in 1960, not a single African American worked or apprenticed as a skilled laborer (United States Commission on Civil Rights 63).

While the labor movement in the 1960s ostensibly aimed to combat such racism, black workers became aggravated with the lack of real progress. In June 1961, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations [AFL-CIO] censured A. Philip Randolph and his Negro American Labor Council for presenting a list of grievances and proposed solutions to racist practices in affiliated unions, and in May 1968, as DRUM was forming, UAW President Walter Reuther denounced racism in his speech to the national convention yet failed to address the immediate demands of the Detroit Black Caucus (Foner, *Organized Labor* 335, 412).<sup>13</sup> Despite Reuther's prominent place next to Martin Luther King, Jr. in Detroit's 1963 civil rights march, black auto workers had little confidence in the anti-racist potential of the UAW. An issue of *ELRUM* illustrated how little the League needed to convince its workers of the gap between white and black workers. In an article titled "Equal Opportunity My Ass!!!" that described one worker's failed attempts to apply for a skilled trades position in furnace repair, despite his expertise in that area, the author simply commented, "has anybody ever seen any brothers in furnace repair?" ("Equal Opportunity My Ass!").<sup>14</sup>

By highlighting the relationship between black workers and machines and by assuming that racism was a central fact of plant life, the League presented racial oppression as the *basic* and *default* condition of US capitalism rather than, as Marxists had sometimes seen it, an *addition* to a class analysis. America's capitalist "machine," the League argued, had black workers at its core. This perspective had both positive and negative consequences for the League. In its publications, the League typically associated

the word “worker” with “black” and the terms official, foreman, corporation, and executive board with “white.” In doing so, it failed to engage with white workers who *did* work in the notoriously difficult foundry or assembly line. Although the League cooperated with a variety of individual whites and white organizations, both inside the factory and out, its public rhetoric was silent on the issue of the rank-and-file white worker.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, however, such rhetoric *did* reflect the statistical realities of plant racism. If Marxists had often imagined the generic “worker” as a white European male, the League re-wrote the “worker” as a black male who struggled with both race and class discrimination.

### **The LRBW and “Primitive” Metaphors: Panther Allies and Uncle Toms**

Although the “worker” and the “machine” were primary organizing metaphors for the LRBW, the group’s literature also invoked the set of primitivist tropes that Panthers and cultural nationalist groups had adopted. Just as the Panthers rejected the Us Organization, deeming it more cultural than political, the League distinguished itself from the Panthers by denouncing the Panthers as too theatrical. Members rejected flashy uniforms and hagiographic posters that were evocative of the Panthers, and Ken Cockrel announced proudly that, unlike the Panthers, the League did not spend its time trying to free its members from prison. But clashes with the Panthers and cultural nationalists didn’t prevent primitivist and BPP imagery from playing an important role in League publications. The masthead of *The South End* and each issue of the plant newsletters depicted the same leaping panther that the BPP had borrowed from the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, and images of spears, African masks, and drums abounded throughout the publications. Even the acronym for the original workers’ group, DRUM,

evoked primitivist associations, especially as it was depicted on the *DRUM* newsletter in lower-case letters, surrounded on the masthead by a conga drum and an African mask.

In one sense, these symbols reflected the fact that the League was a black nationalist group as well as a Marxist one. In 1968, physical expressions of solidarity with the black liberation movement, whether in the form of afros, Panther buttons, dashikis, or Africanized names, were widespread. But the League and its affiliates also cared about how images of the “primitive” helped them define and challenge their relationship to industry. The terms “industrial jungle” and “urban jungle” suggest that the urban space, the industrial space, and the jungle are linked by chaos, apparent danger, and race or class “otherness.” While using the primitive to unmask the barbarity at the heart of capitalism just as the Panthers did, the League also employed it to access a more combative structure of worker-management relations. Like some contemporary anarchists who embrace the “primitive” as a form of personal empowerment in an overly complex world—a symbol of a do-it-yourself ethic—the League saw worker militancy as a kind of do-it-yourself unionism. The organization employed the “primitive” to extract workers from the machine and claim for them a non-technological agency. If, as union officials had long alleged, collegial union-management relations civilized the “industrial jungle,” the League was ready to give up such “civility” and wade back into combat.

Moreover, the *symbols* of such militancy were crucial tools to motivate workers into action and to make them feel linked to the rest of the black liberation movement. General Baker verifies this when he argues that cultural nationalist expressions—in this case in the distinctly American forms of afro hairstyles and machine-gun necklaces—were the initial spark that drove the *DRUM* movement. He traces the beginning of radical

African-American sentiment in the auto plant to the period immediately following the 1967 Great Rebellion. When he returned to work after his imprisonment, the first sign he remembers was a change in style:

We picked up all those empty fifty-caliber machine gun shells [that the National Guard had used on the community during the Rebellion] and took necklaces out of them. We put rawhide straps through them and everybody wore these fifty-caliber machine gun empty casings, you know, as a souvenir of the Rebellion, and everybody started growing afros, so you can imagine all these workers starting back up in the plant with their hair standing out on their head and these fifty-caliber machine guns. So it scared all those old white foremen to death at the goddamn Dodge Main Plant, but it was just an expression. (Baker)

The bullet casing necklaces, which Cockrel later dismissed as trappings of cultural rather than political activism, were a resistant style specific to the experiences of urban rebellion, bearing witness to the firepower that the government had employed against the black community. Baker repeats the type of casings to emphasize their enormity, as they are nearly four inches long. Their size serves as a mark of bravado, a phallic symbol that allows the wearer to advertise his or her ability to live through a domestic battle with the US military even as it threatens future combat by reminding onlookers of the wearer's propensity to *unleash* violence.<sup>16</sup> It also recalls white America's attempts to murder black men, as the National Guard's bullet hangs around the wearer's neck in place of the lynch mob's noose. Moreover, the enormous bullet roughly resembles the shape of an animal's tooth or claw, both traditional adornments in indigenous American and Pacific Islander societies. In keeping with the generalizations of racist primitivism, many Western depictions of unspecified "natives" or "primitives" highlight such necklaces, especially on males, whom Western culture typically sanctions against wearing jewelry. By stringing their own necklaces from bullet casings, then, Baker's co-workers at Chrysler

expressed solidarity with the national Black Power movement while replacing romantic images of the “primitive” with the threat—and the reminder—of urban rebellion.

Seeing that black workers were motivated by cultural signs of solidarity with the black liberation movement, whether primitivist or not, the League accepted the widespread influence of the panther trope and, later, of the Black Panther Party. In fact, the LRBW and the Detroit branch of the BPP were closely intertwined. In 1966, before Newton and Seale had established the BPP, the Revolutionary Action Movement [RAM] founded a number of organizations with the name Black Panther Party, one of which was in Detroit.<sup>17</sup> Future League members General Baker and Glanton Dowdell, who were leaders in the local RAM, took part in this project (Ahmad, *The League* 5).<sup>18</sup> Years later, when Newton and Seale’s BPP had become famous, the League and its members saw the Black Panthers as a cultural and political force, and they took pains to establish connections with the Panthers’ Oakland leadership, setting up a meeting for John Watson to travel to Oakland and discuss a coalition between the LRBW and the BPP in April 1969 (Ahmad, *The League* 18; Federal Bureau of Investigation 21 March 1969).<sup>19</sup> *The Black Panther* published several positive stories about the League that summer, and the two organizations cooperated peacefully for a time. This positive relationship would deteriorate, however, as the LRBW’s disapproved of the Black Panthers’ focus on the lumpenproletariat, their performative posturing, and their tendency to attract police repression. Nevertheless, the League continued to use the panther logo, recognizing and validating the sway that Panthers held over the minds of young black Americans. The League recognized that the panther image was no longer simply a signifier of primitivism—it now carried a broader association with black radicalism.

If afros and bullet-casing necklaces had marked a change in worker sentiment, the panthers, drums, masks, and spears aimed to consolidate black worker consciousness around a broad-based political program. For this reason, the League developed different strategies for its use of primitivist images depending on the publication. In *The South End* and *ICV*, which aimed to educate readers broadly about Marxist politics by printing radical theoretical materials by Che Guevara or Robert F. Williams and in addition to articles on local and international political issues, primitivism played a small role. Aside from *The South End*'s masthead panthers, rarely did images or references to the “primitive” come into play. This was, perhaps, because the League did not necessarily see primitivism—or its expressions in cultural nationalist groups—as an ideological stance. Instead, as its relationship to the panther image and the machine-gun necklace suggests, the League employed primitivism as a *tactic*. It allowed workers to build associations between workplace militancy and the black liberation movement, and it defined this militancy as aggressive, confrontational, and uncompromising. Thus, it was in the plant newsletters such as *DRUM*, *ELRUM*, *Spear*, *CHRYRUM*, and their auto plant cohorts, where images of the primitive emerged most prominently. These documents aimed to radicalize workers by engaging them with very specific plant grievances: the newsletters listed “Uncle Toms” and racist “honkeys” by name, discussed safety violations in particular areas of the plant, reported on black workers who had been denied promotion, printed exposés of local union corruption, and reproduced demands on the union and company. These specific issues were intended to mobilize black auto workers while the primitivist images linked local struggles to the cultural nationalist trend and the

Black Panthers' radical cachet. Primitivist imagery encouraged readers to view their workplace grievances as part of a larger project.

By adopting primitivist figures as symbols of black radicalism, the League presented black dissent as a vast project that united cultural nationalist and revolutionary nationalist groups. The Panthers and the League, despite their actual differences, merged in the visual structure of League pamphlets and even in the Detroit Panther organization. The lines between RAM, the BPP, the League, and its myriad of affiliated organizations were fuzzy, and League publications propagated this uncertainty. Primitivist imagery forged a bond between the industrial workplace and black radical thought outside factory gates. There was no reason, the League publications suggested, that worker struggles should distinguish themselves from cultural nationalist or community work.

For workers who wanted to make the leap from plant activism to the larger black liberation struggle, the League did offer a secondary publication—either the *Inner-City Voice* or *The South End*.<sup>20</sup> Not only did these publications offer more theoretical perspectives, but they took seriously the need that readers would have for political *education* as well as political news. Like *The Black Panther*, the *Inner-City Voice* used Liberation News Service for much of its national and international news, but *The Black Panther* tended to report only on international current affairs. *ICV* stories on national liberation movements in Africa, on the other hand, typically included maps and historical overviews that detailed the area's colonial past, its economic structures, and its resistance movements. Although these articles usually supported the liberation movement uncritically, they did offer readers enough context to understand the relationship between colonial oppression and the capitalist exploitation that auto workers faced in Detroit. *The*

*Black Panther*, too, aimed to make these connections, but it usually relied upon a declared solidarity rather than a lesson on history and geography. The *Inner-City Voice* (and, to a lesser extent, *The South End*) gave readers of *DRUM* or *ELRUM* access to the larger movements of cultural and revolutionary nationalism that the League hinted at with its imagery. If workers chose to limit their focus to their workplaces, they could do so by reading only the plant publication, but the primitivist imagery and its connection to the vibrant trends of cultural and revolutionary nationalism urged them to look beyond the plant—to the League’s next publication.

Of course, for those workers who read *only* *DRUM* or *ELRUM*, the League offered no context to understand the symbolism of spears, panthers, and African masks. Although members saw themselves as internationalists and provided extensive international coverage in the *ICV*, they separated the generic “primitive” tropes from specific references to African struggles. Instead, panthers and spears emerged in plant newsletters that did *not* address international issues. While many of the League’s core members had both university and activist education in international politics, rank-and-file black workers who read *DRUM* and *ELRUM* did not necessarily have such information at their command. For them, then, primitivist imagery *did* signify a relationship to black radicalism. It did not, however, lead workers to understand the real experiences of African people or to link black American struggles with black African struggles. African images appeared in *DRUM* and *ELRUM* simply as signifiers for black American radicalism.

Within this American context, however, the League’s simultaneous celebration of workers and use of Afrocentric imagery also presented primitivism as a strategy for



tackling industrial exploitation. If the union had transformed the auto plant from an “industrial jungle” characterized by extreme heat, dangerous tangles of overhead machines, low wages, and labor-management warfare, into a “civilized” structure of negotiation, the League questioned the value of “civilization.” And if discomfort, danger, and wages remained concerns for auto workers, it seemed that the union had only succeeded in eliminating labor-management warfare. The UAW cooperated with Chrysler, according to the LRBW, by planning strikes when the company would suffer the least, and the check-off dues system prevented union members from holding leaders accountable by withholding dues money (“The Real Deal on the Special Conference”). Grievance systems existed, but many workers considered them inadequate. An ELRUM flyer claimed that, before the 1970 contract negotiations, Chrysler had 60,000 local grievances outstanding with the UAW. A dispute in a Ford plant in Dallas finally sparked the UAW to take action, settling 31,240 grievances at “a rate of 1,837 per day.” (“Attention Black Workers!”). The sheer number of grievances and the UAW’s eagerness to solve them quickly only when contract negotiations approached suggested to the League that the “civilized” relationship between union and corporation benefited union and corporate officials but not workers. Fed up with the failures of union negotiation, the League chose to embrace the conflict, if not the bad working conditions, that characterized the “industrial jungle.” Its tactic of choice, after all, was the “wildcat,” a term whose reference to unsanctioned strikes dates back to at least the 1930s and thus coincides roughly with the “industrial jungle” as a label for unsanctioned worker militancy.

The interaction of primitive and industrial tropes, for the League, then, acted as a marker of black worker militancy. It also meant learning to reconcile the languages of black nationalism and Marxism, a problem that black radicals had struggled with for many years.<sup>21</sup> A July 12, 1968 DRUM rally and its description in League publications illustrates this project. In an article for *The South End*, Luke Tripp expressed pride that the participants had intimidated union officials when they entered Local 3 offices: “you had workers in their ‘humping’ blue coveralls, and their union ‘representatives’ laid to the bone in their mohair suits” (Tripp 66).<sup>22</sup> Here, the LRBW suggests that working-class “authenticity” lies in sartorial expression. By noting the coveralls as a sign of “humping,” Tripp stressed the status of workers not as middle-class union success stories but as hard-working laborers. The union officials, by contrast, appear extravagant in their “bourgy [bourgeois] air conditioned room” and “mohair suits.” As the protest moved from Local 3 headquarters to Chrysler headquarters, however, Tripp remarks on a different subset of the same protesters. Here, he comments that the sound of “conga” drummers “brought every Honky in the building to the windows,” and “the sisters in their bubas and the brothers dashikied to the bone went for their thing” (68). While the confrontation with Local 3 officers had elicited a demonstration of industrial identity, the move to corporate headquarters prompted a shift to Afrocentric tropes.

Each of these moments uses dress to express a sense of revolutionary “authenticity,” demonstrating to UAW officials that this was *real* working-class revolt, to the corporation that it was a true threat, and to fellow blacks that it was the definition of radical blackness. “Authentic” blackness, then, collides in League work with “authentic” working-class status. While Afrocentrism is often criticized for embracing essential

notions of blackness, the League's adoption of Afrocentric dress in tandem with working-class dress rejects essentialism in favor of style and tactics. In some moments, one style properly expresses the League's political position, while another moment requires another style. The dashiki and the coveralls are tactical metaphors rather than essential moments of "authenticity."

We can see how these tactics function in the disparity between the actual demonstration and its description. Within the protest itself, the two groups would have mixed together, forming a visual picture of diverse working-class/black nationalist militancy. The textual narrative of the protest, on the other hand, separates the two sets of styles into different confrontations. When marching into the union office, DRUM claims working-class status to highlight the distinction between the protesters and the union officials. The UAW had long struggled with black workers over racism and civil rights, and it denounced DRUM for "black separatist" behavior. This protest, however, argued that the debate, at core, was about what it meant to be *working-class*. It asked the UAW to revise its core notions of worker identity and worker needs. In other words, the League insisted on pitching a battle against the UAW on its own turf of labor rights rather than relying simply on the discourse of race.

When confronting the corporation, on the other hand, Tripp stressed the presence of drummers and dashiki-wearers. Chrysler, unlike the UAW, already saw itself as labor's opponent in the labor-management struggle. Historically, however, auto plants had viewed black workers as promising strike-breakers and reliable low-wage workers. During the Great Rebellion, as General Baker remarked, black auto workers earned different treatment than their cohorts in the community—escorted through plant gates,

they were regarded as the productive rather than the riotous element of the black community. When Tripp described the corporate “Honkeys” peering out their windows at bubas and dashikis, he reveled in the League’s attempt to re-write the black worker’s position in Chrysler’s eyes. Rioters and workers, both wearing afros and bullet-casing necklaces, were no longer distinguishable, and the black liberation movement that appeared on the streets would not skip the auto factories. In this moment, worker militancy and community radicalism mingled to send the message that, even if white and black workers might still be divided, the corporate world could no longer pursue a safe route to exploitation through black workers.

As the primitivist images in *DRUM* and *ELRUM* had remained generic and unexamined for readers of those texts, such tropes at the July 1968 rally were also decidedly vague when described in published reports. The drum-playing protesters, for instance, earned the attention of every reporter covering the event, but the real origin or signification of both the drums and the African-style clothing seemed lost on many observers and even some participants. Commentators variously referred to the drums as congas, bongos, and even “congos.” League member Akbar Muhammad Ahmad, for example, refers to a “congo band;” John Watson remembered “congo drums;” Luke Tripp described a “conga group;” and white anarchist auto worker Edward Lee read the drums as “bongos” (Ahmad, *The League* 8; “To the Point of Production” 4; Geschwender, “The League” 6; E. Lee). Congas and bongos are both Cuban drums with African origins that arrived in the Americas via the slave trade. “Congo,” however, simply registers confusion between Caribbean drums and the African Congo.<sup>23</sup>

White anarchist Edward Lee's observations particularly reflect the way the League left its primitivist signifiers open-ended. He comments not only on the "bongo drums" but on the protesters' "naturals," "colorful African dress," and the "tikis around their necks" (1). These signs made him wonder whether there was "in the beat of the drums a hint of Mau Mau," while his less sympathetic white co-workers murmured "obscene savages" as they looked out the window (5-6). Lee and his white co-workers, then, absorb all of the League's symbols as generic primitivist signifiers. The bongo drums collide with the rebel Mau Maus of Kenya, and the American afros intersect with New Zealand's Maori tiki talismans. Although a lack of photographs makes it impossible to tell what necklaces the protesters actually wore, it is possible that Lee mistook bullet-casing necklaces for tikis.<sup>24</sup>

Lee reads the protesters through the lens of Western racist primitivism, but even League members allow generic cultural statements to override specific ones. As a result, all of their published accounts of this protest associate dashikis and drums with militant resistance more than they do any particular cultural or political allegiance. Lee remarks that a union picket line is "boring," "cut-and-dried," and "lack[ing] enthusiasm," whereas the DRUM wildcat reminded him of the 1937 sit-down strikes, characterized by "spontaneity and fellowship" (7). Luke Tripp agrees when he sees on the faces of white management "the same expression on the faces of the Calvary in Custer's last stand" (68). Just as Lee confuses the protesters' necklaces with Maori wear, Tripp offers a generic primitivist reading when he aligns the African dress, drums, and the Native American victory against Custer. For both Tripp and Lee, the "primitive" signifies the League's militant unionism rather than a political commentary on racist primitivism.

Employing primitivism as a code for militancy and a break from union collegiality was not so far-fetched in a culture that had defined militancy with words like “wildcat” and “jungle.” In the League’s hands, these metaphors took on multiple meanings. By claiming allegiance with the “jungle” and the “wildcat,” *DRUM* and *ELRUM* extricated black workers from their relationship to the industrial machine. The unpredictability of the wildcat and the jungle contrasted with the monotonous movement of the assembly line and the union grievance procedure. For black workers who felt themselves compared to and treated like machines, jungle metaphors offered a sense of agency and spontaneity that originated not only in racist notions of the primitive but in real anti-racist movements that had employed the same tropes. Moreover, by associating racialized metaphors with worker militancy and resistance to union bureaucracy, the League presented the next step in union radicalism as a distinctly *African-American* one. “We, the super-exploited black workers,” the League declared, would be the vanguard of a radical movement.

### **“A Burst of Sunshine” from the UAW**

The League expanded on this project in its publications by combining “primitive” images with rhetoric that re-wrote union discourse in a more militant voice. The UAW, by the mid-60s, had adopted a tone of moderation and union-management cooperation. Its monthly national publication, *UAW Solidarity*, stressed labor rights issues and addressed national economic and social problems, but it tempered these issues with light, upbeat pieces such as reports on good camping locations or dressmaking patterns. Most importantly, *UAW Solidarity* used optimistic language to describe union struggles with management. Local workplace grievances rarely earned space in the newsletter, and

national contract negotiations were described as great successes. Staff writer Ted Ogar, for example, described the 1969 contract's increased pension benefits as a "burst of sunshine that would light the worker's golden years of retirement" (Ogar 3). Even management-labor conflicts engendered only mild reproofs. An article that faulted management for problems with automobile quality and warranties stated that "we in the UAW were greatly disappointed at the cutbacks in warranty protection. [ . . . ] These restrictions were, in effect, hidden price increases" ("The Auto Industry"). Some union texts went so far as to defend management against workers. The official bulletin for Eldon Avenue's Local 961 in 1970 laid the blame for a bad settlement with Chrysler on union members' performance: "this is naturally due to the excessive absences all plants are suffering from," the Local wrote, "and I hate to inform you, but we are Chrysler's highest offender in this area."

The UAW also separated itself from the League by embracing civil rights in place of Black Power. In 1969, the UAW's International Headquarters, Solidarity House, sent a mailing to members denouncing the League and its affiliates. The text presents the UAW as a moral force against racism, using the abstract language of "humanity" and "equality" to distance itself from black militancy. Citing its participation in Selma, Detroit, Washington, D.C., Jackson, and Memphis marches, the UAW Executive Board bolsters its civil rights credibility while using terms like "racist," "hatred," "violence, fear and intimidation" to describe the League's tactics. The letter ends by declaring that "we shall continue to dedicate ourselves and our efforts to the cause of justice and human brotherhood. [ . . . ] Men and women of good will must reject hatred and violence and must stand together for only as we join together can we build a better tomorrow for

ourselves and our children” (United Auto Workers). This rosy vision of twentieth-century unionism presented the positive attributes of solidarity, togetherness, brotherhood, and good will as the basic tools in building racial and economic justice.

Frustrated by dispassionate language from a union whose public support for civil rights had not translated into real workday justice for African Americans, *DRUM* and *ELRUM* constructed their texts with plant gossip, anger, and violent rhetoric. This reinforced the problems of vague primitivist tropes by valuing masculinist virility and what they deemed black radical “authenticity” against the examples of workers, both male and female, who didn’t conform to League expectations. In one particularly egregious instance, an *ELRUM* flyer referred to a woman coworker who was running for a steward position as “Marie Banks, Eldon Ave.’s No 1 WHORE,” claiming that she “has admitted fucking and sucking management and now this Bitch wants the respect of Black Brothers and Sisters” (“Let’s Get Down”). It is unclear whether Banks was an African-American or a white co-worker, although a 1971 issue suggests that she may have been black when it refers to her sympathetically as “Sister Marie Banks” after she suffered an injury on the assembly line. (*ELRUM* 3.3). This abuse was not limited to women of one race. *ELRUM* attacked white women in much the same manner, as in a flyer referring to a group of white secretaries as black Local 961 president Elroy Richardson’s “prostitute service.”<sup>25</sup>

The League’s abuse of women’s sexuality to express political differences had serious implications for its activism. Women had no positions on the LRBW executive board and few leadership positions at all. Although many women participated in League work, they were often relegated to tasks such as “cooking committee” or “clean-up



committee.” Marian Kramer remembers that the LRBW’s women spent much of their time fighting the men in the organization against epithets that labeled women comrades “the IWW: Ignorant Women of the World” (Baker; H.A. Thompson 171). Today, General Baker regrets the League’s gender politics, and some former members contend that it was a lack of respect for women that, in part, led to the 1971 split. According to Hamlin, a male member or aspiring member sexually assaulted a female League worker in one of the organization’s offices. Angry over the organization’s inability to curb or adequately punish such violence (and frustrated, too, with other political differences), Hamlin, Watson, and Cockrel left the League (Hamlin, Interview).

Just as vituperations against women confirmed male radical identity, expressions of heterosexual male virility and black “authenticity” guided the League’s relationships with non-radical African-American men in the plant, who often earned the labels of “Tom” or “Mollytom.” The cover story of a 1970 issue of *DRUM* marked fellow worker Joe Davis as an Uncle Tom when he vied for a staff position with the UAW. The writers recycled racist white discourse in the title by referring to him as “Ole’ black Joe,” and the article wondered why Davis “refuse[s] to be black” (*DRUM* 3.3). In its non-plant publications, the League broadened the definition of “workers” to include the black community, but here it attempted to reverse the association, denying “authentic” blackness to workers who moved into positions of union or management leadership.

This was ironic, as the League’s demands stressed the importance of black leadership in both the union and the corporation. The LRBW claimed to support any and all black leaders when they made demands for “black” foremen and union officials. When they found themselves confronted with black foremen and union officials,

however, they quickly changed their rhetoric, denouncing many of them as traitors. What they wanted were *radical* black foremen and union officials, although they insisted on using the term “black” to signify “black radical.” By eliding these two terms, *DRUM* could claim that Joe Davis “refuse[d] to be black.” His true allegiance, *DRUM* suggested, should lie with black radicals and not with white leaders who, regardless of his politics, would see him as “Ole’ Black Joe.” This interpretation of “Ole’ Black Joe” seems to have been the League’s intention, as a September 1969 *ICV* article titled “Tom of the Month” wrote of National Baptist Convention President Joseph Jackson using the same phrase. The author of this article follows a reference to Joseph Jackson with the parenthetical remark “(or as whitey would say, ‘Ole Black Joe’),” and after this statement, the text refers to Jackson as “boy” (“Tom of the Month”). In both cases, the League uses racist language to insist that these men accepted demeaning appellations for themselves when they cooperated with whites. The article “Ole’ Black Joe,” however, employs its epithets without identifying them as white sentiments rather than League notions. Although writers might have found this obvious, such an understated argument could easily have made more enemies than friends.

Confident that its ideology would win the majority of black workers over, *DRUM* decided (after much debate over the value of electoral politics within a corrupt union) to run its own candidates in union elections (Geschwender, *Class, Race* 103). These potential officials would proffer an alternative to leaders like Joe Davis and Joseph Jackson. *DRUM* made its first attempt when it ran Ron March for trustee in a September 1968 election for Local 3 (Georgakas and Surkin 49; Geschwender, *Class, Race* 104). March garnered 40% of the original vote and then lost in the run-off when the

UAW urged retired workers—who were almost exclusively white—to vote (Geschwender, *Class, Race* 103-8). This pattern of significant support and ultimate defeat would characterize many of the League’s attempts in union elections in the coming years. A DRUM vice-presidential candidate for Local 3 lost a run-off in 1969, and an entire DRUM slate for union offices once again failed in 1970 (108-116). The only League victory was Elroy Richardson—an independent candidate whom ELRLUM supported in his 1969 campaign for President of Local 961. After his victory, *ELRUM* quickly began to identify Richardson as a “punk ass” and an “Uncle Tom” when he failed to live up to ELRUM’s expectations (*ELRUM* 3.2; *ELRUM* 3.1). Perhaps because the League never succeeded in placing its own members in leadership positions, the *DRUM* and *ELRUM* newsletters associated black leadership with “Tomism” even as they attempted to win key positions themselves. The leadership that DRUM or ELRUM members would provide, the newsletters indicated, would be more aggressive, masculine, and “authentically” black.

This vision of the ideal black radical candidate meant that, in League publications, any form of interracial cooperation in black leaders appeared as a kind of weakness. Significantly, this was a feature of the League’s *texts* more than its actions, as the group did work regularly with white allies.<sup>26</sup> Within ELRUM, white worker and radical John Taylor was a major organizing partner; the white radical group Eldon Wildcat often supported League actions; and the Eldon Workers’ Safety Committee included whites as well as ELRUM members. From a textual standpoint, however, interracial associations could deplete a black worker’s racial allegiance and heterosexual virility. The *DRUM* article about Joe Davis noted that:

before he ran for his steward position in the trim shop he wore a tall natural hair style but he thought that his (militant) image would not appeal to the old white women in his dept. 9150—so he cut his hair down white-boy style but that was not enough he was even seen down on his knees in the parking lot building a fire under the lock of the car door which was frozen for a group of old white women in his Dept. He was playing the role of a punk boy scout so that he could brown-nose upon a few votes. What kind of militant is that?

For DRUM, Davis's kindness in helping fellow workers unlock a car (a decidedly non-political act) marks him as a black traitor. The author masculinizes the white women in order to make the encounter appear like a homosexual one in which Davis kneels before another man. The women also appear as dominant social figures whose presence demotes Davis to the status of a child—a "boy scout"—by asking him to serve them.

Despite *DRUM*'s attack on Davis, the article concludes by calling him back to blackness and, by extension, to radicalism. Challenging him to answer *DRUM*'s accusations, the author announces that "the black workers in 9150 would like to know Joe. The same workers who took up that 200 dollars to buy that watch for you for Christmas Joe. They thought quite highly of you THEN Joe. Say something Joe . . . Joe. JOIN DRUM." In these final lines, the newsletter speaks directly to Davis, including him as a member of *DRUM*'s reading audience. The aggressive tone devolves into a conversational plea because, unlike Walter Reuther or a Chrysler management figure, Davis is a potential *DRUM* member. After railing against Davis for his "brown-nosing," *DRUM* opens the door for Davis to change his status and "join *DRUM*."

By framing Davis as a black traitor and an Uncle Tom, *DRUM* hoped to elicit emotional responses from readers and to intimidate Davis into changing his ways. These tactics were common, too, in *ELRUM* newsletters, where "Uncle Tom Awards" relied heavily on the association of "Uncle Toms" with homosexuality. In an undated issue of

*ELRUM*, an extensive attack on black union official Dan Toomer was followed by an article titled “The Grab Ass Game,” “devoted to all you toms and innocent bystanders who think its cute when the white foremen and white skilled tradesman (whatelse) pat you and stick their fingers in your ass.” In articles like these, where sexual encounters were always described in homosexual terms, accommodation to the UAW or management contaminated blackness and normative masculinity. Recalling John Bracey’s claim that the League avoided performativity in favor of concrete action, I maintain that *DRUM* and *ELRUM*’s angry tirades against “Uncle Toms” classify as performances of hetero-normative masculinity. The specificity of the League’s emotional rants certainly had an effect on in-plant sentiments about *DRUM* and *ELRUM*. *DRUM* might have urged Joe Davis to “join *DRUM*,” but public humiliation probably made it unlikely that he would do so.

### **“Jungle” Tactics: Spontaneity vs. Organization**

If “Uncle Toms” were League villains because of their tendency to cooperate with whites and the union, League heroes were workers who made the term “industrial jungle” come alive. According to this definition, the wildcat was the only acceptable form of strike, and even a wildcat strike that had earned some union support was labeled by *ELRUM* a “pussycat strike” when union officials pressured workers to return to work. In *ELRUM*’s estimation, the UAW had domesticated the original “wildcat” into a non-threatening housecat, transforming the sexually virile panther into a submissive, feminized “pussycat.” If even League-sponsored wildcats could become “pussycats,” the League’s definition of “wild” was clearly escalating. By embracing wildcats and aggressive, emotional language even when its organizational decisions were more staid,

the League publicly supported spontaneity over organized action. Again, this public language did not reflect its actual use of organized structures. This contradiction would become a problem for the League when it took a celebratory attitude toward the 1970 James Johnson murders.

Johnson was an employee at the Eldon Avenue plant who had immigrated from the South, landing in the auto industry after a series of mental problems and physical fights had ousted him from jobs in the army and a restaurant (H.A. Thompson 16-18). As an auto worker, ELRUM and the UAW thought little of him before 1970: he didn't attend union meetings, participate in radical organizing, or even accompany co-workers to the bars after work. In May 1970, Johnson took a medical leave after a car accident and was denied coverage for his medical expenses. Just weeks later, he obtained permission from a foreman to take several days off, but upon his return he found he had been fired for going "AWOL." Johnson filed grievances with the union over both issues, and they eventually settled in his favor. What he saw as insults from the management, however, continued. On July 15, 1970, he expected to be promoted to job-setter after receiving a strong recommendation from a co-worker. Instead, a foreman demoted him to the brake oven, an unpleasant task usually reserved for those with low seniority. Lacking the gloves needed to perform the job, he asked to see his union steward and was promptly suspended for insubordination (124). Frustrated and angry, Johnson walked out the door and returned later that afternoon with a gun. He shot and killed the foreman who had relegated him to the oven, a second foreman, and a job-setter who tried to calm him down (125). Johnson then allowed security guards to handcuff him. Later, he stood trial for the

murders with the League's Ken Cockrel as his defense attorney, eventually earning an acquittal by reason of insanity (137).

With its own Cockrel on the case, the League adopted Johnson as a hero figure, releasing stories about him in its myriad of publications. Even in issues that did not include discussions of Johnson, League newsletters from the trial period often printed a drawing of Johnson's face as part of the masthead, sometimes with the phrase "Hail James Johnson!" The League was not alone in its respect for Johnson. When he was escorted through the Eldon plant with the jury during the trial, Johnson received encouraging shouts and raised black power fists from fellow workers (H.A. Thompson 143).

For the LRBW, however, Johnson represented the organization's delicate relationship to the industrial and the "primitive"—or to "civilization" and "barbarism." Johnson's spontaneous attack both revealed the racist "barbarity" beneath capitalist industry and celebrated Johnson's spontaneous, violent response. An article in *Spear* described Johnson's move from the South to the "industrial jungle of Detroit" and his subsequent struggle with "industrialist barbarisms" in the auto plant ("Who is James Johnson"; "Salute to a Black Patriot"). These articles went on to describe the racist conditions that Johnson had endured both in life and at the plant, from witnessing a cousin's lynching to facing the disrespect of plant foremen. He responded to these "barbarous" conditions, the League insisted, as any good black radical would. He refused to "buck cance [sic: dance] and grin," playing into racist expectations of black submission ("Who is James Johnson"). Instead, he resisted violently and spontaneously. In a poem titled "The Ballad of James Johnson: James Johnson Needed a Thompson,"

which appeared in many of the League's publications, the anonymous author writes that "nothing tames a man like James, / he does what he has to do." These representations suggest that, if one worked in an "industrial jungle" where the whim of a foreman could override hard work and seniority, a spontaneous, "untamed" response is inevitable. Johnson's actions brought to fruition the League's aggressive rhetoric, and as a result, League newsletters compared Johnson to Harriet Tubman, dubbed him a "Black Patriot," and declared that "James Johnson is you and me" (*ELRUM* 3.5; "Salute to a Black Patriot"; "Who is James Johnson").<sup>27</sup> Like a wildcat or the 1967 Rebellion, Johnson's rebellion was impromptu and unregulated.<sup>28</sup>

This celebration of *disorganization* mimicked the way the League had merged auto workers and the black community in order to *both* privilege workers *and* suggest that all black Detroiters were workers. In this case, the League smudged the boundaries between LRBW members and non-members, and more importantly, between organization and spontaneity. When *DRUM* and the lesser known League publication *Spear* credited James Johnson's triple shooting with "mov[ing] the Black Workers struggle at the point of production to a new and higher level" or identified him as "an armed guerrilla," they suggested that his actions were politically and ideologically sound (*DRUM* 3.[?]; *Spear* 26 March 1971: 2). They presented his rampage as part of an organized black revolt. Just as the League referred to the 1967 Rebellion as a "General Strike," it depicted Johnson's behavior as organized to suggest that the black revolutionary threat was broader and more unpredictable than organizational affiliations might indicate.



On the other hand, part of what attracted the League to Johnson was precisely his status as a political outsider. His impulsive mutiny allowed the League to revel in a moment of disorganized, dangerous dissent. While in reality the League attempted to organize itself into intricate webs of hierarchy, responsibility, and political education, its newsletters thrived on the sense of disorganization and emotional behavior that characterized Johnson.<sup>29</sup> Like an apparently spontaneous wildcat or the gossipy, fiery plant newsletters, the Johnson shootings replaced the UAW's sober negotiations with violent revolt. Although the LRBW critiqued the Panthers for taking up arms too soon and too publicly, such behavior seemed romantic and exciting in the person of James Johnson. In him, it was a sign of the inevitable revolution that would emerge when the masses of "non-political" workers would rise up spontaneously.<sup>30</sup> The League, of course, had a much more regulated structure in mind, and the contradiction between its own tactics and its celebration of Johnson foreshadowed the group's imminent demise.

### **Art and the Auto Worker**

The League's consistent distinctions between textual claims and real actions indicated that the organization used rhetoric to inspire emotional responses and controversy. Their strident rhetoric was part of the organization's "poetics," and this poetics shared a great deal with the Black Arts Movement aesthetic. Amiri Baraka produced similarly controversial depictions of women, conservative African-Americans, and Jews in his Black Arts poetry.<sup>31</sup> The League's aggressive rhetoric, like Baraka's, reflected an adamant disavowal of conciliatory civil rights discourse in favor of a more militant, revolutionary ideology. It was a performance and not simply a statement of ideology. Unfortunately, this rhetorical strategy often left readers of League publications

without an understanding of the political nuances that LRBW members acknowledged when they built networks dependent on key women figures and white allies. By combining this rhetoric with *actual* poetry in its publications, however, the League made some attempt to assuage this problem. It published poetry that exhibited the same kinds of aggressive statements, and it did so while aligning itself with the artistic project of the Black Arts Movement. Because poetry employed metaphor and invited interpretation, the League hinted to readers that its political metaphors might also require analysis. Art, in other words, helped build a bridge between the League's primitivist or aggressive metaphors and the group's real organizational complexity.

The League could be critical of artists, accusing them of lacking political acuity. It did, however, see the creation of alternative media and art as part of the revolutionary project. As a 1971 *ICV* article declared, a crucial question for the black liberation movement is whether "Black artists [will] serve the oppressor or the oppressed," and in answer to this question, the League envisioned a National Congress of Black Artists and Musicians that would contribute to the struggle ("Open Letter to Black Artists" 7). Although it never built such a structure, the League maintained a commitment to art even as it shied away from anything it saw as overly intellectual.

The most famous League artistic production was a mural known as the Shrine of the Black Madonna, painted by LRBW member Glanton Dowdell<sup>32</sup> for Reverend Albert Cleage's Detroit church and revealed on Easter of 1967 (Dillard 287). Cleage had been a major figure in Detroit's radical black community for some time, working in the Group on Advanced Leadership [GOAL] with local Marxists James and Grace Lee Boggs and black nationalists Milton and Richard Henry (Ahmad, *The League* 2).<sup>33</sup> While the League

would later dismiss Cleage as insufficiently radical, the minister's interpretation of the Bible had great impact on Detroit's black community, and Cleage's church continues to thrive today, many decades after the LRBW's demise. According to Cleage, Jesus had been a black revolutionary, and direct action on earth was a necessary component of Christian theology (Haskins 65-66).



**Fig. 5. Shrine of the Black Madonna**  
**Credit: Angela Dillard**

Cleage's black Jesus took second place, however, in Dowdell's mural of the black Madonna. In this painting, the dark-skinned Madonna stands upright on a rocky surface with a town visible in the distance, holding her child against her so that his face is largely hidden. She carries her own head upright, staring straight ahead into the eyes of viewers. Unlike League texts, which tended to represent women in a negative manner or to ignore

them altogether, Dowdell's piece positions Mary at the center of the scene. Moreover, traditional images of the Madonna and child usually transfer the viewer's focus to the child by depicting Mary in a seated position, looking at her child or inclining her head toward him as she looks sidelong at viewers. Dowdell, on the other hand, represents the child fully swaddled and facing sideways. His small body takes up only the space between his mother's arms. Mary's standing pose and direct gaze, even in the midst of a

rocky landscape, suggests that she is in control of the situation. She, rather than Jesus, appears as the symbol of black power and resilience.

Dowdell's mural offered a counterpoint to the League's often sexist texts. Although the LRBW failed to present its positive relationships with women and other allies in its publications, this lone instance of visual art illuminated the group's more conciliatory side. It also helped the League build a connection with Cleage's politicized version of the black church. As General Baker remarked years later, the church remained an important core for black cultural and community work even if many of the LRBW's members did not accept religion as part of a Marxist ideology. Baker took his own children to church, he said, not because he wanted them to learn religion but because he wanted them to be part of the community (Baker). Dowdell's painting, which remained in Cleage's church long after the League's relationship with its minister had broken down, made the links between disparate black radical organizations metaphorically permanent even when political tempers raged.

The Shrine of the Black Madonna mural also reveals the concrete links between the League and the Black Arts Movement. Dowdell's mural was painted just months before the beginning of the first outdoor, collective Black Arts mural, Chicago's *Wall of Respect*, which began production in July of 1967 (Donaldson 22; Crawford 23). Public art on the theme of black power was gaining in popularity in the late 1960s, and although Dowdell's image preceded the outdoor mural trend that Chicago's *Wall of Respect* launched, the choice of the black Madonna as a subject was a precursor to the celebratory depictions of black individuals that would soon appear on outdoor walls all over the country.

The LRBW's links to the Black Arts Movement were not simply aesthetic. Members of the executive board had personal connections to Black Arts writers. Beginning in 1970, League member Ernie Mkalimoto Allen served on the editorial board of the *Journal of Black Poetry*, a major vehicle for Black Arts writers, and the League's relationships to the Revolutionary Action Movement [RAM] fostered other concrete relationships to Black Arts. General Baker and Glanton Dowdell were RAM members, and as James Smethurst and Akbar Muhammad Ahmad make clear, RAM was one of the major political influences on BAM artists. Poet and essayist Larry Neal and poet and visual artist Askia Touré (then known as Roland Snellings) were also members of RAM, and Amiri Baraka maintained an ongoing dialogue with the organization (Ahmad, "RAM" 270; Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement* 168-71). RAM urged its participants to work within cultural organizations like New York's literary circle Umbra and Baraka's Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School, giving the organization a strong grounding in the Black Arts Movement community [BART/S] (Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement* 168-72). It is not surprising, then, that Baker and Dowdell would lead the League's foray into visual art.

The League also developed links to the Black Arts Movement through its publications. In-plant newsletters often printed poetry and advertised local events that featured Black Arts Movement work. A 1970 issue of *DRUM*, for example, advertised a League fundraiser featuring an array of local black musicians such as the First African Primal Rhythm Orchestra and the Ashanti Dancers and Drummers, and a 1969 issue publicized a local production of Jimmy Garrett's play *We Own the Night*, a drama that details the combat death of a black revolutionary (*DRUM* 3.[?]; *DRUM* 2.18). In an

attempt to link artistic and plant cultures, *DRUM* announced that July 19 was “black worker night” for Garrett’s play. Moreover, the League ran its own bookstore and aspired to use Black Star Publishing and Black Star Productions to release black film and literature. “It is our intention,” a 1971 *ICV* article stated, “to explore the Black arts (music, poetry, drama, etc.) and attempt to offer suggestions and concrete proposals to the developing revolutionary Black Arts movement” (“An Open Letter to Black Artists” 6).

Both the in-plant publications and the League’s newspaper—sometimes *ICV* and sometimes *The South End*—printed original poetry on a regular basis. Poems were presumably collected from League members or local sympathizers, as they were not typically the work of nationally renowned artists. Nonetheless, these local poets often imitated the performative, politically-engaged structures of more famous Black Arts poets. Moreover, they capitalized on the fear of bourgeois or overly intellectual literature that haunted many Black Arts writers. Reginald Lockett’s *Black Fire* poem “Die Black Pervert,” for instance, denounces intellectual or “bourgeois” pursuits among African-Americans: “You sit there, sissified, / and brag about the / T / R / I / P / TO / E / U / R / O / P / E / You are to take this summer / To / S / t / u / d / y / Beethoven, / And Chopin / mozart. / [ . . . ] / and become a conditioned / / FAGGOT” (Jones and Neal 354). In this poem, class status, signified by the trip to Europe, and intellectual pursuits such as studying classical music mar one’s relationship to the Black Power cause. They also mark a man as feminine and homosexual. Amiri Baraka took these sentiments to heart when he attempted to distance himself from his past relationships with white Beat poets in Greenwich Village. He admits in his autobiography that, when he first moved from

Greenwich Village to Harlem, he was “insecure and tender-headed about my recent life. [. . .] most of us were from downtown and knew next to nothing about Harlem” (306). As a black artist living in Harlem, Baraka felt that he lacked “authenticity” in black Harlem. Although he had grown up in a working-class family in Newark and lived in bohemian poverty among white artists, he worried that his status among members of the white intelligentsia tainted his relationship to the “people.”

These feelings, which defined black radicalism through heterosexual masculinity and working-class status, influenced the Black Arts definition of a poet. The poem “Alafia,”<sup>34</sup> written by Odaro (also listed by her “slave name” Barbara Jones) and published in the seminal Black Arts collection *Black Fire*, comments on the process of identifying poets for the anthology. Odaro’s poem is either a letter to the editors of *Black Fire* or an imitation of such a letter: “I am writing at the request of / Larry Neal, Ed Spriggs and Harold Foster / Who seem to think that you / Might be interested in my / Poetry // They tell me that you will / Soon be publishing an Anthology / And that you are interested / In New Young Black Writers” (356). In these lines, Odaro suggests that the authors are seeking young writers, uninitiated into the literary world, rather than established writers. She closes her poem by indicating that the editors are looking for writers who will express the “Black Aesthetic:” “The Brothers said that you / Might want to know something / About me also // I think my poetry will help / You in that area // I am 20 years Black, born in / Harlem / Poverty’s little girl / Black Woman, Queen of the World.” Here, Odaro insists that her poetry will express her identity as a black woman from Harlem. In the anthology, however, this is the only poem of Odaro’s that the editors

publish, and its final statement of authorial identity is the poem's crux. Not only will her poetry stand in for her identity, but her identity can also constitute poetry.

As Odaro notes, the editors of *Black Fire* were interested in defining the Black Aesthetic through the work of young, relatively unknown writers. Although the volume certainly included many well-known writers and essayists such as Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, Stokely Carmichael, and Harold Cruse, it also published a surprising number of literary newcomers. This strategy was troubling to literary critics, who often deemed *Black Fire* and the Black Arts Movement inferior or unprofessional. A 1974 review of *Black Fire* remarked that the collection "rang[ed] in quality from embarrassingly amateurish to profoundly powerful" (Sackett 252). Sentiment hadn't changed significantly by 1991, when David Lionel Smith noted that "professional critics of the 1980s and 1990s generally hold writing of the Black Arts Movement in low esteem" (93). The editors of *Black Fire* and other Black Arts Movement artists would have been unsurprised, as they intended to challenge traditional valuations of literary quality. Don L. Lee's<sup>35</sup> poems for Gwendolyn Brooks illustrate this process. In "Gwendolyn Brooks," Lee notes that white critics and English instructors admire Brooks as a "negro poet" (D.L. Lee 89). This status with the white literary establishment made Brooks a potential outsider to the Black Arts Movement. Only when she becomes a mentor and comrade to Black Arts poets does she escape this contamination by becoming a "blackpoet": "u could hear one of the blackpoets say: / 'bro, they been calling that sister by the wrong name'" (90). Writers who had been accepted by the white literary establishment like Brooks and Baraka had to shed these affiliations in order to become Black Arts poets.



In reality, of course, it was impossible to shed intellect or talent, and literary technique remained a key component of Black Arts work *at the same time* that many Black Arts writers strived to open up the field to less experienced poets. As James Smethurst notes, “despite the fairly common attribution of anti-intellectualism to Black Arts, an almost obsessive concern with the theorizing of the relationship of the African American artist and his or her formal practices to the black community (or nation) was one of the most distinguishing features of the movement” (*The Black Arts Movement* 68). Black Arts form took on different shapes, ranging from unrhymed verse that employed the vernacular to what Smethurst describes as “archaic and somewhat purple anthemlike or epic Anglo-American” styles of verse (234). Smethurst insists that this concern with poetic form did not grow independently of academic establishments. Professors educated young black students in increasingly multi-ethnic literary traditions, fellow students offered intellectual camaraderie while inspiring resistance to traditional curricula, and universities themselves sometimes provided resources for black artistic productions. Moreover, young black artists referenced and often worked within the bounds of “high art” or contemporary avant-garde trends in their creation of a “Black Aesthetic” (43).<sup>36</sup> As Smethurst notes, the New American poets whom Baraka scorned remained a key influence on the formal properties of Black Arts work.

The tension between academic or avant-garde work and anti-intellectual statements gave the LRBW an opportunity to identify with the Black Arts Movement. Because many Black Arts writers were steeped in guilt about their intellectual backgrounds, auto workers saw themselves as ideal poets. Although they, too, might have attended college or been self-educated in literary history, their role as industrial workers

rather than full-time artists gave them an aura of “authenticity.” In LRBW publications, then, poems appeared both as *imitations* of Black Arts work and as *contributors* to it. The writers sometimes fell into the category that *Black Fire* reviewer Sackett identified as “embarrassingly amateurish,” but this did not necessarily disqualify them from belonging to the Black Arts Movement. If art was to be political, written by and for “the people,” then it would sometimes have to sacrifice traditional notions of quality.

By publishing poems that mimicked or attempted to participate in the Black Arts Movement, the LRBW refined its relationship to metaphor. LRBW poems always addressed race politics (nearly always black nationalism, though *Sauti* published a Chicano Movement poem on at least one occasion), but they often dealt with broader concerns than did the other stories in *DRUM* or *ELRUM* (*Sauti* 1.9). While most articles in the League’s in-plant publications focused on issues of immediate concern within the plant, poems addressed larger problems of racism, international politics, or black pride. These poems often mirrored the formal properties employed by more famous Black Arts writers, and they also tended to employ the League’s metaphors of black radical masculinity. Transformed into poetry, these metaphors now asked readers to interpret them. The overlap between anti-intellectual and intellectual work simultaneously reassured readers that they could access poetry and encouraged them to think more deeply about political metaphors.

A poem by Slick Campbell titled “Let Freedom Ring”<sup>37</sup> demonstrates how art, especially when printed in the in-plant publications, helped fill the gaps in the League’s sometimes problematic ideologies, introducing complexity where the League’s rhetoric produced contradictory simplicity. Appearing in both *DRUM* and *ELRUM* in late 1968,

Campbell's poem opens with phrases that match the League's generic metaphors, using basic rhymes and a sing-song tone to detail the trials of the African-American freedom movement: "we've spent century after century / us black children / trying to find our / love / but all we have found is injustice / in the eyes of the peace loving dove." While platitudes dominate in these opening stanzas, the poem changes as it progresses. Simple rhymes become more oblique, sometimes disappearing altogether, the lines increase in length, and the language intensifies. The seventh stanza introduces raw, rapid-fire language that mimics Amiri Baraka's contemporaneous work: "while black martyr's [sic] walk down hot southern roads a greasy white finger twitches and the barrel of a shotgun roars."

Although this stanza continues the poem's original subject matter—a commentary on the civil rights movement's inability to handle white violence—the twelfth and thirteenth stanzas mark a shift in content. The twelfth stanza refers to "X slavemaster bringing fear to the east" and the thirteenth introduces the first person speaker:

but I am not to fight standing here  
in the Mekong Delta with a punji stick  
in my groin  
eyes bloodshot bulging with terror  
as I watch them X slave master my enemy  
dragging bloody bodies across  
the living color horizon  
instilling fear into young black minds  
and courage to exploit bloody atrocities  
into sad youthful white souls.

Here, Campbell moves from generalities about the black liberation movement to an individual speaker's experience in Vietnam. Injured by the Vietnamese opponent's punji stick, a sharp stick stuck in the ground and intended to produce small but debilitating injuries in American soldiers, he identifies his "enemy" not as the North Vietnamese but

as the “X slave master [. . .] / dragging bloody bodies across / the living color horizon.” The bloody bodies are simultaneously black and Vietnamese, alienating the reader from the white soldier even as Campbell allows us to feel conflicted about him. The speaker describes the white soldier “cutting out hearts and kissing / sex symbols at night.” This phrase doubles as a description of violence—“cutting out hearts”—and a more sympathetic understanding of a soldier who uses magazine cutouts to connect himself to the home front. The “X” in place of an “ex” produces a similarly ambivalent effect. Nation of Islam members adopted the X as a last name to signal the unknown African name behind the “slave name,” and in this case Campbell denies a name to the slave master with the ‘X.’ At the same time, the “X” appears as a shared stain of slavery on the names of *both* white and black Americans. It has altered the white soldier’s past as well as the black soldier’s.

Meanwhile, the speaker suffers physically from a wound inflicted by the Vietnamese and emotionally from the racism that has brought him there. The phrase “I am not to fight standing here / in the Mekong Delta” might refer to the white denunciation of blacks who fight back against racism—or it may refer to the soldier’s real inability to fight as a result of his injury. In these stanzas, Vietnam and US racism intertwine, and the poem moves from the Mekong Delta to the refrain of black martyrs shot on southern roads. As it draws to a close, Campbell lengthens the lines into run-on phrases, repeating “let freedom ring” as the empty promise of American society. “Let freedom ring” the poem closes, “to the rhythm of blond quivering hips while death sees angry loving black lips let freedom ring.” In these final phrases, “freedom” appears in two possible ways. First, we could read the ending as a reference to black-white sexual

encounters that leave black men susceptible to the whim of the lynch mob. In this case, white female “freedom” leads to black male death. Second, we could read freedom to mean two *separate* things: the sexual freedom of whites, in this case represented by white-white sex, and the “freedom” of blacks that offers them little hope except death. “Freedom,” in this case, has a salacious ring, suggesting that black deaths are as pleasurable and “freeing” for whites as sexual release. In either case, this warped notion of “freedom” urges the reader to question the goal of the black “freedom” struggle as well as its tactics.

The poem’s final moments, then, begin to address some of the theoretical holes that otherwise plagued the League’s in-plant newsletters. While *DRUM* and *ELRUM* rarely referenced national or international political situations, focusing instead on immediate plant issues, Campbell inserts the international political landscape into the in-plant newsletter with his discussion of Vietnam, suggesting that international politics overlap with and influence local politics of race and class. Moreover, his final mingling of white sexual deviance and “freedom” calls into question the League’s rhetorically violent use of sexuality. Here, Campbell links white understandings of sexuality to violence against African Americans, and in doing so, demonstrates how sexuality and the rhetoric of sexuality can be used as weapons. This moment reveals the problems, then, associated with the League’s own use of sexuality to demean and silence co-workers.

Moreover, by beginning with a trite opening and progressing into more urgent language and increasingly complex content, Campbell contributes to the League’s theoretical project while maintaining a safe distance from the “bourgeois” taint of the literary. This approach characterizes the League’s typical relationship to literature and

metaphor. Despite its publication of poetry and its connections to the African-American arts scene, the LRBW also advertised its working-class separation from the literary. Describing the League's publications in retrospect, General Baker insisted on distancing the group from literary pretensions: "we were not English students, so we butchered the English language" he commented (Baker). For the League, simple metaphors signaled working-class "authenticity" just as, in its newsletters, radicalism and political aggression marked black "authenticity."

Like Campbell, other League poets attempted to imitate Black Arts form, and in doing so they relied on oral traditions in black culture that were popular among Black Arts writers. George Jones's "Bogue Set," for instance, which was published in several 1969 League publications, presents an example of "rapping" (G. Jones).<sup>38</sup> Not simply the musical form of rapping that we now associate with hip hop, Onwuchekwa Jemie defines the oral tradition of rapping as "a *monologue*, lively in style, colorful in language, rich in images, intended to persuade or give information, or to exhibit oratorical skills before an approving audience" (41). Jones's poem is a rap that celebrates black pride, laments "Tomism," and incorporates the sexist, homophobic language common to the League. Jones begins by denouncing intellectualism and creating an anti-intellectual black radical in-group: "well, niggers, here we is---- /or should I say are for you niggers who don't know what is is?"

This moment fades, however, as the rest of the poem groups all African Americans together, variously boasting about their strengths and denouncing their weaknesses. He begins with a celebratory boast: "Here we is, the bonafide the classified, the sanctified, the alley's pride, and conk-head fried, with our GM ride, sitting on our

backside, sore from Whitey's shoe hide.... / Here we is y'all!" This joyful performance of strength and unity begins to fade in the next stanza: "Here we is...in mass confusion, talking revolution with resolution with no contribution to get retribution from a slave institution—trying to fake a solution! / Here we damn well is!" In this stanza, ineffective radicals are a target for criticism, but Jones ends with the same declarative statement of solidarity. Even as the poem begins to turn against the "Toms," employing homophobic and sexist language, it continues to absorb these figures within the phrase "here we is." Although "Mr. Intelligent Nigger who ain't like us...figgers we're going to pull some triggers and de-nigger some niggers," this fear appears unfounded. The speaker delights in the "Tom's" fear, but it does not appear that the rest of the collective "us" will pull the trigger. Instead, "we" includes the whole spectrum of black Americans: "the living the dead [sic], the drunk, the punk," and "Mr. Intelligent Nigger."

Moreover, although Jones does include sexist and homophobic statements, denouncing "imitation men" "with a brain gone blank from the butt-hole rank" and declaring that "we sell our wives throughout their lives and beat their asses for being jive; gimme five," he does so in the context of rapping's sense of humor. These statements are hyperboles, and they begin to seem absurd when paired comments like "we raise our babies like we've got the rabies." Like the oral rap tradition, this poem has to be taken with a grain of salt, seen as an example of grand-scale metaphor and word play. It fits into a literary and cultural tradition rather than simply a political project. This does not negate its sexist and homophobic statements, as such prejudices certainly recur in the African-American oral tradition. It might, however, lead readers to see the League's other

homophobic and sexist boasts as metaphors and word play rather than absolute political prescriptions.

The League projected a similar message with “Our Thing is DRUM,”<sup>39</sup> the signature verse of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement. The poem relies on a heavy meter and a generic rhyme scheme accompanied by melodramatic content: “deep in the gloom / of the firefilled pit / Where the Dodge rolls down the line, / We challenge the doom / of dying in shit / While strangled by a swine.” “Doom,” “gloom,” and the “firefilled pit” are clichéd phrases, though the fact that the “firefilled pit” is a literal description of the hottest auto industry jobs hints at something more interesting behind the word choice. Out of this hellish atmosphere, DRUM emerges as an overstated hero: “now we stand-- / For DRUM’s at hand / To lead our Freedom fight, / [ . . . ] / and damn the plantation / and the whole Dodge nation / For DRUM has dried our tears.” Personified as a conquering champion in these lines, DRUM rescues the passive, teary-eyed workers from their plight. Ending with the refrain (which became a slogan for the League) “U.A.W. is scum / Our thing is DRUM!” the poem functions in some ways as a rallying cry for demonstrations and group cohesion. Like a fight song for a sports team, it need not be sophisticated poetry.

But “Our Thing is Drum” may be more tied into African-American poetic traditions than its simple rhetoric suggests. Although it was published anonymously, General Baker attributes it to George Jones, the author of “Bogue Set.” The dramatically different styles of these two poems indicate that Jones was self-conscious about his manipulation of poetic form. While “Bogue Set” played on traditions of rapping, “Our Thing is DRUM” employs the ballad form, with a repeating structure of four beats



followed by three beats. Simple rhymes are standard fare in a ballad, and the literary ballad had a history in African-American music and literature as a tool for eulogizing the victims of oppression or celebrating resisters. In 1963, Brooks had published “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till,” and in 1969 Detroit poet and publisher Dudley Randall had released “The Ballad of Birmingham” in memory of the Birmingham Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing. In addition to these contemporary ballads, the many older ballads of John Henry’s fight against the machine echoed in the League’s poem, interacting with the organization’s frequent reference to and admiration of John Henry. This LRBW ballad, however, was more lighthearted than these predecessors, mixing a narrative of oppression with the celebration of DRUM’s resistant potential.

“Our Thing Is Drum,” positions the League and its rhetoric within the black literary and folkloric tradition, and it seems to have a sense of humor. Like the chants “Long live DRUM!” at wildcat rallies, “Our Thing is DRUM” spoke of melodramatic valor represented by mythic figures like John Henry. The League, on the other hand, built an organization without any real heroes. James Johnson, for instance, didn’t belong to the League and had no relationship to its success or failure. Unlike the Panthers, who lionized Newton, Seale, and a host of others when they were imprisoned, the League typically celebrated only those who were *unaffiliated* with the group, leaving LRBW leaders (and members) as relatively little known figures in Black Power history. The League’s overblown poetry and chants, then, which presented DRUM as a regal persona rather than a collective of workers and community allies, were partially serious and partially comic. Such language infused workers with emotional enthusiasm. On another level, it positioned black heroism within the black artistic tradition of ballads, raps, and

boasts. For *real* people, however, revolution would not mean gun-toting action but mundane struggles between workers, union, and corporation. The League's poetry urged workers to see their daily struggles as heroic even as they understood that heroism was largely a myth.

LRBW poetry claimed a place in the Black Arts Movement based on an anti-bourgeois, working-class notion of poetry for and by "the people." The League's poetry might not have attracted much notice from more famous Black Arts participants or literary critics, but it served a crucial function within the group. First, it told auto workers that they were not *simply* laborers. They had interests and aspirations beyond the auto plant, and they could participate in the Black Arts Movement as either writers or readers. Second, it asked readers to see abstract League metaphors through the lens of art. If metaphors need interpretation within a poem, and if a Black Arts poem is a political statement, then perhaps political statements, too, require interpretation. By infusing Black Arts poetry into their political publications, the League drew attention to its use of political metaphors, suggesting that these terms might be worthy of study and that auto workers were already skilled writers and readers of metaphor.

## **Conclusion**

The League's artistic endeavors could not erase the problems with its homophobic, and sexist, and sometimes overly violent rhetoric. Nor could poems save the organization from internal strife. The LRBW's construction of the black auto worker as the center of revolutionary action meant that the organization was constantly juggling its relationships to the community, students, and the artistic community. In some cases, this was productive, as it allowed members to open up the definition of "worker,"

redefining Marxist terminology and revising activist aims. But by embracing the auto worker, whether in name only or not, as the central figure at the “point of production,” the League replicated the spectacular vision of auto factory production that Rivera had produced for the Detroit Institute of Arts—an image that depicted women only as the natural “reproducers” and not economic “producers.” As a result, its rhetoric valued heteronormative masculinity and its practice relegated women to secondary roles. This masculinist ideology emerged with special force when the League portrayed James Johnson as the epitome of spontaneous combat, permitting members to confuse unplanned, violent revolt with the structured political action that the group attempted to create.

Despite these problems, the League’s mix of Marxism, black nationalism, and primitive metaphors successfully located race at the center of the labor movement’s tropes and actions. If the American labor union had been built on segregated locals and non-white strikebreakers, then the “civilized” relationship between union and management offered little hope to workers of color. At a time when white workers, too, were questioning the value of bureaucratic unionism (as the next chapter will examine), the League presented black nationalism as an alternative to union-management cooperation. Only the recognition that racism was as crucial as class, the LRBW suggested, could spark and maintain worker militancy. If union officials used racialized language to deem militancy the mark of a “jungle,” the League would respond by making the racial implications of such rhetoric visible.

The League’s enthusiastic use of vague and conflicted metaphors both reflected and propagated the ideological looseness of an unwieldy organization. LRBW rhetoric

validated workers' daily labor as a contribution to the struggle in a time when activism was often a full-time commitment. Moreover, it asked both workers and community members to meet at the plant gates with picket signs and literature, making the relationship between the two as imprecise to management as it was in League texts. This philosophical diversity contributed to the League's demise, as the group struggled between worker-centered organizing and community projects even as it faced interpersonal strife.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, while the Black Panthers produced a widely circulated national newspaper and earned regular mass media coverage, the League largely addressed itself to its own local black community. As a result, its metaphors were less concerned with re-writing racialized language and more centered on immediate tactical needs. It might not have had a national impact on public discourse as the Panthers did, but the League quietly reached out from Detroit's auto plants to the enormous, unwieldy Black Power movement. It asked Detroit's auto workers, stuck as they were in the plant for upwards of eight hours a day, to see themselves as key players in the black liberation movement and beyond. The League instructed workers to see *themselves* as heroes, using small moments of worker-management combat as the key to a larger political victory.

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<sup>1</sup>The conference was organized by Newsreel, a radical film collective that had helped the League of Revolutionary Black Workers produce a documentary about its work titled *Finally Got the News*. Although the League and Newsreel had originally been on good terms when Newsreel arrived to work on the film in 1969, tension soon arose. When Newsreel organized the January 30, 1970 conference, inviting and paying appearance fees to Black Panther Emory Douglas, the League became angry. LRBW members saw this as an indication that Newsreel was willing to fund the Panthers, despite the fact that they had refused funding to the League (Georgakas and Surkin 143, 200). By 1971, League member John Watson had exchanged angry letters with Newsreel members over which group had the right to film equipment that had formally belonged to Newsreel (Dan Georgakas Collection, Box 1, Folder 1-8).

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<sup>2</sup> A buba is a loose-fitting shirt in the Nigerian Yoruba style that can be worn by either women or men.

<sup>3</sup> A “wildcat” refers to a strike that has not been sanctioned by the union. Corporations and unions often agree to “no-strike clauses” in employment contracts that prevent employees from striking legally during the term of the contract. Legal strikes may occur only during the contract negotiation period, when both management and union are prepared for battle. Wildcats occur when small groups of workers conduct an immediate, unapproved protest.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to these primary publications, the League produced a plant newsletter for each affiliate (*CADRU*M, *The Blues*, and *FRUM*, for instance serviced a Cadillac Plant, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, and a Ford plant, respectively), and its high school members produced the *Black Student Voice*. Printed on the same equipment and in the same offices, these newsletters had much in common with *DRUM* and *ELRU*M, often releasing the same stories and artwork. Unlike the national *Black Panther*, which printed as many as 125,000 copies, the League had a much smaller print run. *The South End* had the largest circulation of 18,000, *ICV* printed approximately 10,000, and *DRUM* ran in batches of 2500 (Georgakas and Surkin 55, 17; Baker). These publications addressed largely the League’s immediate constituency in auto plants as well as Detroit’s black community.

<sup>5</sup> Hamtramck is an independently governed city completely surrounded by Detroit. Historically, Hamtramck and its assembly plant were populated largely by Polish workers, and by the late 1960s young African Americans were challenging older Polish workers for union and shop floor power. “Dodge Main” earned its name because Chrysler manufactured the Dodge line of cars there.

<sup>6</sup> General Gordon Baker, Jr. is the given name of one of the League’s major figures. “General” is his first name and not a military title.

<sup>7</sup> Although black presence in auto factories had been increasing for decades, Detroit’s July 1967 Great Rebellion sparked an even larger influx of young African Americans into the plants. In the three months before November 1967, General Motors [GM] hired 12,200 new workers, 5,300 of whom were black (Widick 193; “G.M. Joins Campaign”). Chrysler and Ford undertook similar hires at about the same time, admitting 4,000 and 5,000 new black workers, respectively (Widick 193). Although statistics are unavailable for the proportion of these workers who were young, UAW estimates reveal that approximately 36% of Chrysler’s workers in 1969 were less than 30. At GM and Ford the numbers were 33% and 30%, respectively. Moreover, the increase in new hires meant that, even among older workers, low seniority was common: 51% of Chrysler workers had less than 5 years of seniority at the time of this survey, as did 40% at GM and 41% at Ford (Foner, *Organized Labor* 411; “How Membership Has Changed”).

<sup>8</sup> *The Inner-City Voice* appeared under a variety of similar names. From its inception in October 1967 until summer 1968, it was published under then name *Inner City Voice* (without a dash). Between September 1968 and May 1969, the *Inner City Voice* was replaced by Wayne State’s student paper *The South End*, but John Watson’s tenure as editor ended at the end of the academic year. When the *ICV* returned in September, it had changed its name to *Sauti*, the word for “voice” in Swahili. Beginning October 1969, it took the combined name *Sauti: The Inner-City Voice*, and by February 1970, the *Sauti*

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had been removed, and the title remained *The Inner-City Voice*. For clarity, I will use only its final name or the abbreviation *ICV*.

<sup>9</sup> Black nationalists had employed “jungle” imagery in an attempt to reclaim primitivist associations between African-Americans and Africa as liberating and self-affirming. Chapter One describes how the Black Panthers made this leap with their representations of panthers, Huey Newton’s pose as a tribal chief, and articles that described the “black jungle” of the ghetto.

<sup>10</sup> These and other comments from Baker were made during a personal interview with him at his Detroit home on March 15, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> As James Smethurst notes, universities were important resources for activists and artists during this period. See his essay “The Black Arts Movement and Historically Black Colleges and Universities” for an examination of how faculty and student interactions at Southern historically black colleges fostered radical intellectual and artistic development.

<sup>12</sup> He qualified this statement by noting that technology, in the hands of management, rarely offers positive changes for workers.

<sup>13</sup> The UAW was affiliated with the AFL-CIO prior to 1968 and from 1981 to the present.

<sup>14</sup> *DRUM* and *ELRUM* assumed that their readers needed little explanation to understand racism within the union, but *The Inner-City Voice* and public handbills directed to a larger public did rely on statistics to establish a distinction between white and black workers. A whole series of stories in the *ICV* identified the UAW as a structurally racist organization, and a 1969 flier aimed at students declared that “black workers constitute 45 per cent of [UAW] membership, but there are only 2 blacks out of 26 on the executive board and in a force of 1100 International Representatives there are less than 100 blacks” (*Sauti: The Inner-City Voice* 2.2; Detroit Revolutionary Movements Collection, Box 1, Folder 1-21).

<sup>15</sup> At the Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle Plant, for instance, the Eldon Workers’ Safety Committee was an interracial group that allied itself with *ELRUM* in fights over conditions. John Taylor, a white leftist and member of this group, was a prominent ally to *ELRUM* in the plant, and he insists that he didn’t feel alienated as a white man (Dan Georgakas Collection, Box 3, Folder 3-17). The League regularly cooperated with white organizations such as the Detroit Organizing Committee, the Ad Hoc Coalition, and People against Racism (Georgakas and Surkin 94).

<sup>16</sup> General Baker speaks only of men wearing the necklaces, though photographs of Black Panther members in the Bay Area around the same time period depict women wearing similar jewelry. In Detroit, men certainly wore the necklaces, though women might have as well (Shames).

<sup>17</sup> *RAM* was a revolutionary organization that advocated self-defense and counted among its high-ranking members Malcolm X and Robert F. Williams. It was also a heavy influence on the Black Arts Movement. Its largely clandestine actions, however, make its work difficult to trace. Several prominent League members, including General Baker and Glanton Dowdell, were active in *RAM*, and the League’s activities fit quite well into *RAM*’s overall project. *RAM* certainly had some sort of influence on the League, though the extent to which the two organizations were intertwined is unclear. See Smethurst and Ahmad for a fuller picture of *RAM*.

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<sup>18</sup> The history of the Detroit Black Panther Party from that point onward is somewhat unclear. James Geschwender and Georgakas and Surkin suggest that the League assigned two of its members, John Williams and Luke Tripp, to establish a BPP chapter aligned with Newton and Seale's party as a way of influencing Panther recruits to support the League. Geschwender argues that this new Detroit BPP emerged in the spring of 1969, but according to testimony of a former Detroit Panther member during US Congressional Hearings on Internal Security, the Detroit chapter had been functioning since at least 1967 (Geschwender, *Class, Race* 121; United States, *Black Panther Party, Part Three* 4430). In fact, former member Donald Berry testified that he joined the chapter in 1967, "the year after it was formed," suggesting that there may have been some overlap between the RAM Black Panther Party and the later Oakland affiliate (4431).

<sup>19</sup> I have been unable to determine whether this meeting actually took place. The planning for it is recorded in the FBI's phone tap logs on the Black Panther's national office in Oakland.

<sup>20</sup> I refer to these publications together because *The South End* was used as a replacement for the *Inner-City Voice* when the League became unable to support the *ICV* financially. The two papers had different features, largely because *The South End* also functioned as a student newspaper and used a largely student staff.

<sup>21</sup> Cedric Robinson describes the history of this process in *Black Marxism*, which traces a radical black history from feudal Europe to the present before profiling W.E.B. DuBois, C.L.R. James, and Richard Wright as black thinkers who addressed the tensions between race politics and socialism. In an introduction to *Black Marxism*, Robin D.G. Kelly adds a layer to Robinson's argument when he maintains that surrealism in the early twentieth century acted as a crossover point for Marxists and black radicals.

<sup>22</sup> "Humping" refers to working or toiling.

<sup>23</sup> The array of references makes it impossible to determine which drums actually *were* used, congas might be a good guess, as they were the drum of choice for the League's imagery in *DRUM* and *ELRUM*.

<sup>24</sup> Lee writes that the protest was videotaped by a participant, but visual records do not remain in current archival collections.

<sup>25</sup> According to John Taylor, a white radical in the plant who largely sympathized with ELRUM, such comments sorely hurt ELRUM's reputation among many workers, both black and white, who felt defensive of the their female co-workers ("ELRUM is Asking All Concerned"; Taylor).

<sup>26</sup> Cooperation with whites was a source of strife within the League. In the minutes of a March 1971 meeting (just before the organization split), Mike Hamlin complained that some members claimed to be unable to work with whites or behaved rudely to them at the office or on the phone. The distinction between action and text, then, was not absolutely clear cut, though the League's formal rules and ideology encouraged interracial cooperation (Bracey and Harley, Reel 9).

<sup>27</sup> The LRBW typically produced articles centrally and reprinted them in a variety of in-plant publications as well as the *ICV*, student papers, and community papers. In each case, I have cited one instance of a piece's publication, but there may be multiple others.

<sup>28</sup> The League celebrated Johnson after the murder and during the period of his trial. Perhaps this was partly because one of its executive board members, Ken Cockrel, served

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as Johnson's defense attorney. It is interesting to note, however, that the few existing historical accounts of the League have also highlighted Johnson as a central figure in labor radicalism. Georgakas and Surkin use Johnson's case as a prologue to their study of the League, and Heather Ann Thompson's *Whose Detroit?* employs Johnson as a recurring theme throughout her book on labor and race in Detroit. Only Geschwender downplays the Johnson event in League history, mentioning it but twice in his historical and sociological analysis.

<sup>29</sup> The LRBW distributed a thick booklet describing the organization's structure as well as its ideology to all members. The formal structure consisted of an executive board, a communication committee, and a central staff. All affiliate organizations were expected to enlist officers for political education, internal and external communications, security, and administrative affairs. Interested individuals were required to pass through a period of probation and, at the conclusion, provide letters of recommendation from full members for admission. In addition, the League attempted to set up a variety of "departments" in the umbrella organization with tasks such as social welfare, communications, recreation, education, recruitment, and fundraising. Procedures for reporting to leaders and channeling funds to the executive board were outlined in detail. The League, then, had a strong aspiration to organization even if it didn't manage to put all of these wheels in motion (*The Overall Program of the League*; "Confidential Communication for Internal Use")

<sup>30</sup> This was not the only time that the League deliberately cultivated confusion between planning and natural, inevitable revolt. Organizational lore held that the unplanned May 1968 wildcat sparked DRUM and, in turn, the LRBW. In fact, future LRBW members had long been waiting for such a "spontaneous" event to build their movement. As early as 1965, a group of future League leaders who also belonged to the Revolutionary Action Movement [RAM] published a journal known as the *Black Vanguard* that declared itself the organ of the "League of Revolutionary Workers." An August 1965 issue included an array of texts that would later appear—in modified form—in *DRUM*, *The South End*, or *ICV*. A "Tom Chart" classified liberal civil rights leaders just as a later "Tom Chart" in *The South End* would publish names of community, union, and plant "Toms;" the *ICV*'s future John Henry image appeared on the front cover; and General Baker's letter to the draft board accompanied Robert F. Williams's "Negroes with Guns," both of which would later materialize in *ICV* (*Black Vanguard* 1.5; *The South End* 23 Jan. 1969). But the *Black Vanguard* didn't fit in the LRBW's historical narrative. Instead, members insisted that the May 1968 wildcat was an impulsive, unplanned event that sparked the League's formation.

<sup>31</sup> Baraka's poem "Black Art" is one famous example.

<sup>32</sup> According to Angela Dillard, Baker worked on the painting with Dowdell (Dillard 288).

<sup>33</sup> James and Grace Lee Boggs had belonged to the Johnson-Forest tendency of a Trotskyist organization known as the Workers Party. The tendency, which included CLR James and Trotsky's former secretary Raya Dunayevskaya (in the party, James was known as Johnson and Dunayevskaya as Forest), split from the Workers Party in 1947 to enter the Socialist Workers Party [SWP] (Le Blanc, "Trotskyism" 29). In 1951, they left the SWP to form their own journal, *Correspondence*, from which James and



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Dunayevskaya eventually split. The Boggses continued to work as independent Marxists who collaborated with many Detroit radicals and had great influence on the younger generation of local activists (Boggs 67).

Brothers Milton and Richard Henry were leaders in the Republic of New Afrika [RNA] under the names of Imari Abubakari Obadele and Gaidi Obadele, respectively (Cunnigen 98).

<sup>34</sup> The word “alafia” is used as a greeting meaning “peace” among those in the African-American community who are interested in Afrocentric ideas. “Alafia,” or “àlàáfíà,” is a Yoruba word meaning “health” or “peace.” (*Yoruba-English/English-Yoruba Concise Dictionary*)

<sup>35</sup> Lee later took the name Haki Madhubuti.

<sup>36</sup> See Smethurst’s *The Black Arts Movement* for a full explication of the relationship between Black Arts, the New American poets, black literary traditions, and the university system.

<sup>37</sup> The poem appeared in *ELRUM* 1.2 and *DRUM* 1.5, and the full text follows:

We’ve spent century after century  
us black children  
trying to find and give our  
love

but all we have found is injustice  
in the eyes of the peace loving dove

century after century after torture  
pain and strife  
like days of old we’re still being  
sold black brothers, daughter and wife

but still we’re not to be angry  
or show signs of militancy

but just cast loving eyes to heaven  
head bowed on our bloody  
prayer worn knee

no Muslim movement says our black king  
let them bomb our churches kill our  
children democracy liberty will  
ring

while black martyr’s [sic] walk down hot  
southern roads a greasy white finger  
twitches and the barrel of a shotgun  
roars

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while the pope[?] in his perfumed palace  
welcomes bigots by the scores and  
black steely eyed leadership sell  
their bodies like common whores

no black power now young fellas that's  
no way to get yourselves free, don't  
burn down those filthy black  
ghettoes never, don't speak of unity

cause this is the promised land

Oh say saint Malcolm can't you see  
by the dawns [sic] stretch and light

X slavemaster bringing fear to the east  
cutting out hearts and kissing  
sex symbols at night

but I am not going to fight standing here  
in the Mekong Delta with a punji stick  
in my groin

eyes bloodshot bulging with terror  
as I watch X slave master my enemy  
dragging bloody bodies across  
the living color horizon  
instilling fear into young minds  
and courage to exploit bloody atrocities  
into sad youthful white souls

to the tune of white soap operas  
while long haired rape artists sing  
while bigot strangle the sound of the bell  
me black me standing here bleeding and going  
to hell to the sound of music I know so well  
let freedom ring

let freedom ring while black martyrs walk down hot southern roads a greasy white finger  
twitches and the shotgun roars  
KA PING KA PING KA PING

don't duck black brother don't cry and frown  
black sister damn fool don't you know  
that freedoms ring

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let freedom ring  
let freedom ring  
let freedom ring to the rhythm of blond quivering hips while death sees angry  
loving black lips let freedom ring

<sup>38</sup> The full text of the poem “Bogue Set” is as follows:

Well, niggers, here we is----  
or should I say are for you niggers who don’t know what is is?—

Here we is, the bonafide the classified, the sanctified, the alley’s pride, and conk-head  
fried, with our GM ride, sitting on our backside, sore from Whitey’s shoe hide....

Here we is y’all!  
Here we is...in mass confusion, talking revolution with resolution with no contribution to  
get retribution from a slave institution—trying to fake a solution!  
Here we damn well is!

Here--imitation men in a lions’ den living pig-pen wondering when the homo yen will  
strike again with minds made pissy from grooving a sissy with a brain gone blank from  
the butt-hole rank and talking hip through our bottom lip while the oars still flip on  
Slavery’s ship.

We raise our babies like we’ve got the rabies; we sell our wives throughout their lives  
and beat their asses for being jive; gimme five.

Here we is y’all—the living the dead, the drunk, the punk, and—oh, hello Mr. Intelligent  
Nigger who ain’t like us other niggers until he figgers we’re going to pull some triggers  
and de-nigger some niggers.

Here we is, and we ain’t as scared of a roller like we is of a haint, a nickel for one, a dime  
for two, a million niggers shining a different shoe.

Here we is y’all....

The hell we is!

Bogue set, baby.

<sup>39</sup> “Our Thing is DRUM” was published anonymously, and it appeared regularly in  
League publications. The full text is below:

Deep in the gloom  
of the firefilled pit  
Where the Dodge rolls down the line,  
We challenge the doom  
of dying in shit  
While strangled by a swine....

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For hours and years  
we've sweated tears  
Trying to break our chain—  
But we broke our backs  
and died in packs  
To find our manhood slain....  
But now we stand—  
For DRUM's at hand  
To lead our Freedom fight,  
And from now til then  
we'll unite like men—  
For now we know our might—  
and damn the plantation  
and the whole Dodge nation  
For DRUM has dried our tears..  
and now as we die  
we've a different cry—  
For now we hold our spears!  
U.A.W. is scum----  
OUR THING IS DRUM!!!!!"

<sup>40</sup> Although ideological differences between the community-based and plant-based factions are typically cited as the reason for the League's split, other factors played a role as well. According to Ernest Mkalimoto Allen, tensions arose between the executive board and the larger, less powerful central committee over some board members' unwillingness to respond to member criticism. This struggle led to the expulsion of Allen, and just as anger over the expulsions was about to erupt, Cockrel, Watson, and Hamlin resigned (Allen, "Dying from the Inside"; Allen, "*Detroit*").

The notes of Muhammad Ahmad, on the other hand, which are based on discussions with former League members, indicate that the split was also precipitated by violent acts on the part of membership that went unpunished by the leadership. In one case, a man claiming to be a League member apparently raped a female League worker at one of the group's offices (Bracey and Harley, Reel 9). Frustrated with their inability to control the membership, the community-centered group defected.

After the split, the Cockrel, Watson, and Hamlin group continued to organize through the Black Workers' Congress, and the League re-oriented itself to a more strict Marxist-Leninist (Maoist) cadre structure. The remaining League dissolved itself into the Communist League in 1972 (Georgakas and Surkin 164). For a full discussion of the League's history, see Georgakas and Surkin's *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*.

### 3

#### *Becoming the Worker, Becoming the Slave: The Socialist Project of Industrializing and the Neo-Slave Narrative*

The Black Arts Movement understood art as an *event*. Actors and musicians performed on New York streets while poets handed out their work on flyers and broadsheets. This was accessible, livable art. When the political energy of the 1960s and early 1970s began to wane, however, African-American poetry and drama gave way once again to the production of novels. In particular, writers began re-telling the history of slavery in the form of the neo-slave narrative. Octavia Butler, Ishmael Reed, Sherley Anne Williams, and Alex Haley, among others, released novels that centered on slave characters, modeling their freedom struggles on the original slave narratives of the nineteenth century.

At the same time, in the shift from the 1960s to the “post-1960s” era, radical groups that had thrived on college campuses began succumbing to internal strife and FBI infiltration. The youth who had entered the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement as college students were making a transition into adulthood. While some left activism for the “real life” of jobs and family and others continued to work as full-time activists, a different group of radical students, mostly those who belonged to socialist organizations, decided that they could combine the two by entering industrial jobs and organizing workers “from the inside.” As rank-and-file union members and committed socialists, they hoped to build a base for revolution from the shop floor by challenging management exploitation and union bureaucracy. This work, known as “industrializing” or “colonizing workplaces,” reflected a growing belief among activists that working-class

organization was more crucial than student activism. And although this was a political development, industrialization also marked an *aesthetic* change. The socialist transition from student to workplace activism mimicked the literary shift between the Black Arts Movement and the neo-slave narrative. Spontaneity, performance, and poetics gave way to narration. On the shop floor, politics rarely appeared as spectacular public action for media consumption. The “poetics” of staged moments like mass demonstrations faded as the 1970s progressed. Instead, the long narrative of daily work, life, and struggle began to take over. In fact, both the project of socialist industrializing and the literary form of the neo-slave narrative produced a similar commentary on 1970s and early 1980s America. By returning to narrative, novelistic structures after the 1960s era of radical uprisings and poetic performances, socialists and artists recuperated core meta-narratives of freedom, progress, and utopia even as they re-wrote grand narratives into miniature stories of personal struggle and, in many cases, failure. As they encountered the philosophical perspectives of the postmodern era, both neo-slave narrative authors and socialist industrializers revised grand narratives while retaining them as political templates.

This comparison between African-American literary form and the political decisions of largely white socialist groups may seem strange at first. I believe, however, that the comparison highlights the political and aesthetic aspects of each. The “post-Black Power” decade (which may begin anywhere from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s and extend into the early 1980s, depending on the organization or political issue) fostered an aesthetic *and* political shift among those who were influenced by the Black Power movement. For African-American writers and American socialists, this period marked an increased focus on identity as a process of *becoming* a heroic political figure. In the case

of socialists, “becoming” was a literal adoption of working-class status, while for neo-slave narrative novelists it meant the imaginative creation of a slave character.

“Becoming” emphasizes the importance of identity and personal experience, while the process of becoming a heroic political figure asks one to think in terms of political meta-narratives. Both neo-slave narratives and socialist industrializing projects responded to the demise of 1960s movements by re-thinking their political strategies even as they remained committed to a *willed* political teleology. The “identity politics” that began in the 1960s have been much maligned as a means of substituting “identity” for nuanced or universalized political positions, but these socialists and novelists proposed a more complicated understanding of identity as a political tool. By reading socialist industrializing through the lens of the neo-slave narrative, we can see how ingrained political narratives influence real political decisions. Conversely, by reading neo-slave narratives through the lens of socialist industrializing, we can understand how neo-slave narratives responded to a political shift that required a renewed focus on long-term, sustainable strategies in the anti-racist battle.

This chapter, then, explores both neo-slave narratives and socialist industrializing programs through a reading of two socialist organizations and two neo-slave narrative novels: the International Socialists [IS], the Socialist Workers Party [SWP], Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada*, and Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*.<sup>1</sup> The SWP and the IS were both “Trotskyist” groups, organizations that had split with the Communist Party in the 1920s soon after Leon Trotsky fell out of favor with Stalin’s regime.<sup>2</sup> Trotskyists in the 1960s and 1970s could be identified by their critical attitude toward existing socialist regimes in the USSR and China, which differed from the more positive assessments of their cohorts

in the Communist Party or the array of Marxist-Leninist (also known as “Maoist”) groups. Trotskyists were not alone, however, in their attitude toward industrialization, as both Marxist-Leninist and Communist Party cadre entered factories around the same time. I will examine the SWP and the IS because “industrialization” was a central aspect of their political programs. The IS was especially successful at establishing long-term activists and democratic union movements in several American unions. I have chosen Butler and Reed, on the other hand, because their texts directly address the relationship between 1970s black American identity and the experience of slavery. Through time travel and anachronism, they make visible the neo-slave narrative’s process of “becoming” the slave. These writers and their contemporaneous socialist organizations shared common strategies of becoming figures in a liberation myth. As “slaves” and industrial workers, writers and activists struggled with the educational mission of promoting radicalism, the bodily consequences of playing a “heroic” role, and the realities of quotidian life that challenged liberation meta-narratives.

### **The Road to Freedom: Progress Narratives in Black Literature and Socialist Politics**

We can see the aesthetic-political link between socialists and African-American writers through the core political narrative of the liberation struggle. For Marxists, the liberation struggle is a teleological myth of liberation from capitalist exploitation. Industrial workers stand at the center of this story, using their labor to create the goods necessary to sustain an industrial society and, in doing so, enriching their employers. As the producers of capital, commodities, and services, workers have the power to disrupt the economy, and, according to Marx’s scientific socialism, they will inevitably rebel when they realize their economic centrality and common exploitation. Workers will seize



the means of production, structuring factories around their collective needs as they build first a dictatorship over their former exploiters and later a socialist society in which the government will fall away and the industrial system will support all fairly, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” (Marx, “Critique” 531). This process hinges on the development of “class consciousness,” or the realization of working people that they are commonly exploited and that, together, they can improve their conditions.

The Marxist narrative employs teleological notions of progress based on the empirical observations of scientific socialism. At the same time, it has a moral quality: the inevitable communist future will be an ethically sound system that represents the culmination of human liberation. Practically speaking, Marx’s phrase “workers of the world, unite!” was an exhortation to action and not simply an analysis of social and economic conditions. As a result, the Marxist narrative serves *both* as a “scientific” analysis and a utopian dream. In this sense it shares something with all stories of oppression and eventual liberation. In the American context, it especially parallels the structure of African-American literature. Robert Stepto famously argues that black American literature reflects the “pregeneric myth” of literacy and freedom, while James Olney posits that original slave narratives followed the teleological pattern of literacy-identity-freedom. Elizabeth Beaulieu modifies the structure for female slave narratives and neo-slave narratives to family-identity-freedom. In each of these cases, critics stress the relationship of African-American literature to progress and liberation. In some instances, the triumph occurs within the text itself, but more often it hangs over the work

as a promised future of collective freedom. Unlike religious or patriotic progress narratives, then, Marxist and African-American myths remain unfulfilled.

This juxtaposition between the socialist project and African-American literature deserves consideration in part because African-American writers have often intertwined their liberation stories with socialist politics. As Cedric Robinson and James Smethurst outline, many African-American artists and theorists have participated in and critiqued American socialist organizations. Socialists, in turn, have seen the black liberation struggle as a key component of the American battle ground. Moreover, both of these groups' liberation stories center on a learning process undertaken by a heroic, sacrificing, and often frustrated figure. For Marxists, the hero is the industrial worker, and for African-American writers the hero is the black American who embodies the legacy of slavery. The worker and the slave express historical group identity and the promise of future success. As a result, they have always been key figures. For socialists and African-American writers in the 1970s, however, in the wake of the turbulent and hopeful 1960s, these characters earned special significance. The civil rights and Black Power movements had generated excitement among activists because it seemed that the masses were waking up and making their demands heard. The 1970s and 1980s, by contrast, marked a disappointing retreat. Both socialists and African-American writers responded to this by looking to the past for inspiration. Among writers, this phenomenon appeared as a kind of imaginative time travel, while for socialists, it emerged in a return to traditional socialist forms of organizing.

During the 1960s, young activists had announced their independence from political and aesthetic predecessors by denouncing the slave and the worker; yet as the

student movement and the Black Power movement faded, socialists and novelists began to recuperate these original heroes. In this climate, both writers and activists used the similar strategy of “becoming” to identify with their slave ancestors and working-class contemporaries, respectively. In the literary arena, the neo-slave narrative asked readers to view intimate and quotidian slave life from the perspective of “Mammies,” “Uncle Toms,” and rebellious slaves of both genders. Historical storytelling and “time travel” replaced the ‘60s myths of the “house slave” and the “field slave” with more developed characters. Socialists, on the other hand, attempted to physically act out working-class leadership, and in doing so, they sometimes replicated romantic notions of the worker as a timeless figure from the Marxist narrative. At other times, they offered a concrete counterpoint to the neo-slave narrative by putting not only metaphorical but *physical* bodies on the line as they attempted to revise and reinvigorate their liberation narrative.

### **Time Travel: Black Power and a Return to the Past**

#### *1. Socialist Narratives*

The fact that the Marxist liberation narrative needed reinvigoration after the 1960s was a disappointment. Socialists had been buoyed by the energy of the 1960s even though their organizations had suffered when young activists proclaimed themselves a “New Left,” rejecting socialists’ hierarchical organization and party discipline. Despite this changing leftist perspective, socialist organizations had not disappeared, and many had thrived. In order to do so, some organizations, including the SWP and the Independent Socialist Clubs of America (the IS’s organizational predecessor), shifted their outlook from traditional labor movement struggles to student uprisings, anti-racist activism, and the feminist movement. The SWP adamantly supported black nationalism,

proclaiming the right to black self-determination as a crucial first step toward working-class liberation. The IS, which was more cautious about endorsing any movement that didn't satisfy all of its political requirements, defended black nationalists against detractors while critiquing some aspects of their political theory and strategy. The IS lamented, for instance, the Panthers' "strong-arm tactics" and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers' tendency to "assume[e] that whites are incapable of struggle" ("Hands Off the Panthers;" Pierce 5). Nonetheless, both the SWP and the IS saw the black liberation movement as a sign of potentially revolutionary energy in American society, and they took great pains to defend it.

At the same time, socialist organizations struggled with the realities that accompanied the shift between the civil rights and Black Power movements. As participants in civil rights organizations, socialists had expressed their anti-racist politics by working in diverse political settings. In conversations with former members of these movements, I found that many had their first political experiences as civil rights workers, and they valued the inter-racial work they had performed in organizations like CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] and SNCC [Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee]. Their socialist work with the SWP and the IS, however, placed them in largely white settings. No exact membership statistics survive for either organization, but the several hundred members of the IS included only a small percentage of minorities, and the SWP, which did keep some membership figures, must have considered its racial statistics embarrassingly low, as it declined to publish them.

The majority-white composition of the IS and the SWP caused much angst in both groups, and when the Black Power movement encouraged the proliferation of all-black

organizations, the problem became even worse. For white socialists, it meant a depressing withdrawal from an integrated radical movement into the white community. Unable to participate in integrated work as fully as they had before, the SWP and the IS initially devoted themselves to solidarity anti-racist work, antiwar projects, feminist activism, and international connections. In 1969, however, the IS revised its priorities when it began planning to send cadres into factories.<sup>3</sup> At the time, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers had brought attention to radicalism among young black auto workers, and wildcat strikes were appearing more frequently in major industry. Industrialization would not only mark a return to a socialist tradition, the IS thought, but it would also lead socialists back into an integrated setting. Former IS member Wendy Thompson notes that, after spending her youth in the civil rights movement, she was attracted to the IS in the fall of 1969 because she saw industrialization as a way to continue her integrated activist work by joining the growing black and female population in the industrial workforce. For the IS, then, industrialization was partially a response to the early *success* of Black Power.

The SWP, on the other hand, didn't begin its "turn to industry" until 1975, and it only completed this project when it seriously demanded that most members take industrial jobs in 1979.<sup>4</sup> By this time, the Black Power movement and the radical upsurge in general had fallen apart. Although the SWP had continued its work in community movements in the early 1970s while Black Power and other radical movements still hung onto life, it turned to industry in the mid-1970s for two primary reasons. First, it saw a spark of worker militancy in recent wildcats and union reform movements.<sup>5</sup> Second, it noted the influx of young women and people of color into industrial workplaces, and it

identified the shop floor as the place that “we will meet the young workers, the growing number of women workers, the workers of oppressed nationalities, and the immigrant workers” (Barnes, “The Turn” 36).

Although these immediate concerns led the SWP and the IS to industry, the notion of entering industrial jobs and attempting to recruit among the working class was not new for either group. The Communist Party and the Socialist Party had often sent members into union jobs in the first half of the century, as did the assortment of socialist groups that split from or arose to contest them. The SWP and the Workers Party had substantial success in trade union work of the 1930s and ‘40s. In 1934, the SWP’s predecessor organization, the Communist League of America, played a central role in the dramatic clashes and victories of the Minneapolis Teamsters union. Trotskyists Farrell Dobbs, Carl Skoglund, and Dunne brothers Grant, Miles, and V.R presided over Teamsters Local 544 when it led a general strike in the city. For years thereafter, this small group of radicals, who would become founding members of the SWP, organized non-union workers and established a militant local that earned the allegiance of its members (Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion*; Dobbs, *Teamster Power*).<sup>6</sup> While many participants in socialist organizations during the first half of the century were already industrial workers when they joined, others left middle-class backgrounds or lucrative careers to take up union work. Ben Stone of the SWP, for instance, abandoned an entrepreneurial past as a toy manufacturer and a white-collar job as an office assistant to become a union painter in 1952 (Stone 30-43).

Because industrialization was both a new strategy and a revival of the Marxist narrative, it encouraged members to throw themselves into metaphors of the *past* in order

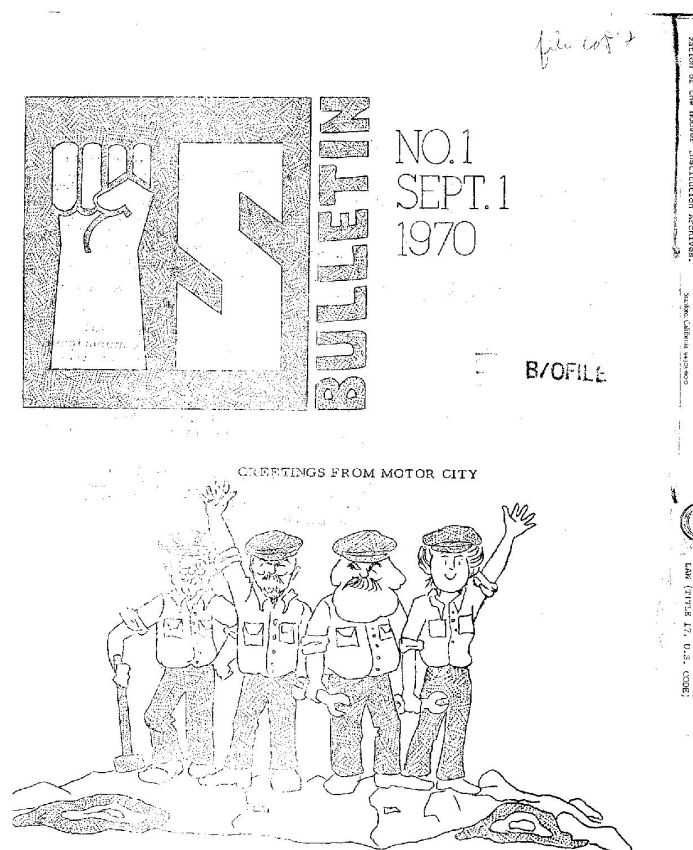
to build the future. When socialists renewed the traditional industrialization project in the 1970s, they did so at the beginning of a historical and economic crossroads in the United States: the shift from industrial dominance to the rise of the service sector. Consequently, industrialization in the 1970s was an attempt to rescue America's industrial working class from its decline and to reinstate the status it held for the SWP and the Workers' Party in the 1930s and 1940s. The move reflected a desire to renew Marx's nineteenth-century vision of the "worker" and their own organizational successes in the first half of the twentieth century. In particular, it meant refusing to accept the new narrative of "deindustrialization."

Interviews with former members of the IS and the SWP reveal different perspectives on whether members were aware of or believed in the coming loss of industrial union jobs. David Finkel recollects that the IS acknowledged the growth of the service and medical industries before it began the process of industrialization. The group chose basic industry, he comments, because it represented the country's most unionized workforce. These unions, the IS thought, had the economic and political clout to make real changes (Finkel, Interview). Milton Fisk of the IS and Paul Le Blanc of the SWP, on the other hand, insist that members had little or no consciousness of approaching deindustrialization. Le Blanc remembers speaking with a graduate student friend in Pittsburgh who cautioned him against the SWP's program: "these industrial jobs that they're getting into," she said, "they're going to be evaporating. There's a big change coming, and it's going to blow this whole thing away." Looking back, Le Blanc recalls that "I didn't know whether to believe her or not. This was like the early 1980s, and it hadn't hit yet, you know, and I'd read a couple of things like that, too, but I didn't

know—is this propaganda from the bosses? How can it be that industry would be leaving?” Despite Le Blanc’s surprise, deindustrialization was already in process—and his graduate student friend was not the only one to have observed it. By 1970, the moment when the IS was entering industry, the proportion of white-collar and blue-collar workers in the US had become approximately equal. In the years that followed, the percentage of total workers who were blue-collar would continue to fall. The two major categories of industrial workers, craftsmen and operators, dropped from a peak of 34% of the total US workforce in 1950 to 26.8% in 1980 and 22.1% in 1990 (Sobek, “Occupations”).<sup>7</sup>

Whether or not the IS and the SWP were aware of increasing deindustrialization when they entered factories, their desire to maintain a traditional notion of the industrial working class reflected a metaphorical desire to return to the past. Socialists often romanticized the “worker” as a figure who belonged to a historical era of basic industrial production. The SWP, for instance, dreamed about the past triumph of the Russian revolution when it used the term “worker-Bolshevik” to describe its ideal industrial member. The IS depicted the most basic of industrial tools, a wrench, in its organizational logo and sold buttons of historical radical heroes such as Joe Hill, Nat Turner, John Brown, and Emiliano Zapata. The group also commented playfully on its own romantic notions when it envisioned Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, and Polish-born German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg moving forward into the present by joining IS members in Detroit’s auto factories. The long-dead revolutionaries wave their “greetings from the Motor City” while wearing overalls and holding hammers.





**Fig. 6. The IS Bulletin, an internal document for members. The figures are, from left, Trotsky, Lenin, Marx, and Rosa Luxemburg. Credit: Lisa Lyons, artist**

By depicting Marx, Trotsky, Lenin, and Luxemburg as workers or by referring to members as “worker-Bolsheviks,” the IS and the SWP conflated the definitions of workers and revolutionaries. Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, and Luxemburg had not been workers. They had been intellectuals who envisioned and attempted to lead workers in class

struggle. In IS and SWP imagery, identifying with revolutionary predecessors became conflated with working-class identification. To become like Trotsky, one had to become a worker rather than an intellectual. To become a successful revolutionary, in other words, one had to live *within* the Marxist grand narrative and not simply theorize about it.

In these cases, the ideal “worker” became a jumble of historical referents. He or she belonged to an era of simple industrial production, sometimes involving the assembly line but never including the realities that many SWPers and ISers faced as telephone

operators, teachers, or truck drivers. Unlike the wrench-wielding worker wearing a soft cap and striped overalls, the telephone operator didn't evoke the requisite sense of timeless Marxist industry. These romantic notions did not overtly influence organizational decisions about which industrial jobs were most politically valuable, but both the IS and the SWP did have a special fondness for those industries that satisfied a vision of the nineteenth or early twentieth-century industrial worker. The auto plant, for instance, had economic and symbolic force as the very expression of twentieth-century American industrialization. Economists had, after all, coined the term "Fordism" to describe the assembly line's division of labor, and as Diego Rivera illustrated in his mural for the Detroit Institute of Arts, it could express both the beauty and the danger of the industrial workplace. These images of the auto plant contributed (though certainly did not determine) the choice of each group to emphasize the auto plant as an ideal choice for working-class employment.

While such romantic sentiments certainly drove SWP and IS decisions on a certain level, industrialization was a tactical and strategic choice, not simply a romantic one. Both groups made political decisions after detailed thought, analysis, and political argument, and members had substantial self-awareness about their behavior. In publications and internal discussion bulletins, the romanticization of the worker elicited a great deal of debate. Jack Barnes responded to such questions in a 1979 essay directed to his SWP comrades: "is it mechanical? Is it a gimmick? Is it a factory obsession? Well, I guess you could say we have a certain obsession about getting large fractions of comrades into great concentrations of industrial workers. [ . . . ] Is it a gimmick? No. It is not a gimmick. Unless our entire political analysis is wrong" ("The Turn to Industry" 46).

While Barnes flatly rejected the accusation of working-class romanticization, the IS was more playful and tongue-in-cheek. The cartoons of Trotsky, Lenin, Luxembourg, and Marx, for instance, appeared regularly on the cover of internally distributed discussion bulletins so that members could simultaneously revel in their associations with past revolutionary figures and laugh about their own idealistic notions.<sup>8</sup>

Members of both the IS and the SWP also expressed anxieties about their romantic notions when they employed the term “workerist,” which distinguished the political *strategy* of working-class orientation from the *idea* of workers’ power as a utopian force. At the time, the expression was largely used to reject the attitudes of other socialist organizations or even comrades within the same group, as it was in a 1972 IS document that labeled those who failed to engage with the antiwar movement because of its student base as “workerist” (P. and M.). In retrospective memoirs, the expression often describes the speaker’s own tendency to romanticize the working class, as former SWPer Tim Wohlforth demonstrates in his political autobiography:

We were very ‘workerist’ in those days, devoting much energy to trying to build a base in the trade unions. For some reason we had a fixation on the docks. It could be that we were all impressed with Marlon Brando’s performance in *On the Waterfront*. Every morning comrades would get up in the dark and make it to the piers as dawn was breaking. In San Francisco, this was a safe exercise, even sociable and jovial, as the union had a radical leadership and the dockers were happy to see anybody up at that hour. In Brooklyn it was a bit scary. Not many papers were sold when the proceedings were being watched from a Cadillac stretch limousine by large men in suits. (183)

In this case, Wohlforth suggests that the SWP’s imagined notions of dockworkers clouded their understanding of the real political situation. Their notion of a dock was based on a 1950s *movie* rather than 1970s experience. As the mafia looked on, subtly

threatening retaliation, the socialists saw themselves as heroes in a script, able to break the mafia's hold on unions simply by selling radical newspapers.<sup>9</sup>

In part, socialists focused on the *past* when they invoked the working class because the New Left had given the working class of the present a bad name. Although blue-collar people were racially diverse in the 1960s, segregated union locals continued to exist in the beginning of the decade, and union leadership was nearly all white. These factors caused many young radicals to identify working-class culture as racist and politically conservative. Former SWPer Dianne Feeley reflects that, when she first joined the SWP as an antiwar activist, she had negative feelings about the working class based on her blue-collar roots:

I didn't really see the working class as an agent of change because I was from the working class, and so I didn't feel that we had any power in society or that we were capable of really doing anything. And I felt, like many working class people who go to college, I wanted to get away from that sort of very backward culture, a culture of cowboy music and people who didn't read and didn't go to see plays and things. I wanted to become educated, and that meant in a sense leaving my class. (Feeley)

Feeley was not alone in this sentiment. In New York, a pro-war rally of construction workers in 1970 led to confrontations with antiwar activists, and in response some activists began referring dismissively to working-class people as "hard hats" ("Augusta Jackson and the Movement"; Coleman 7). This divide between the working classes and youth rebellion was so prevalent in the 1960s that, although groups like SDS ostensibly believed in the importance of the working class, they avoided building relationships between workers and students.<sup>10</sup> Former SDS member Robert Pardun writes that many of his cohort maintained that the racism of white workers made them too difficult to recruit—SDS's job, then, was to radicalize their college-age children (237). The

Weatherman group that broke from SDS in 1969 took its dismissal of the working class even farther when member Bill Ayers (somewhat jokingly) suggested that the apathy of most Americans about imperialism and racism warranted replacing the slogan “serve the people” with the phrase “fight the people” (Varon 138).

The “turn to industry,” then, was simultaneously a return to a pre-1960s ideological perspective, a recuperation of the working class as a revolutionary force, and an attempt to re-integrate socialist politics in response to the separatist ideology of Black Power. Facing the turmoil of 1970s politics, which included the demise of vibrant social movements and the onset of deindustrialization, an imagined return to the past and to the Marxist teleological narrative gave socialists a renewed sense of control. If they traveled through time, metaphorically, to a vaguely historical industrial moment that matched the requirements of Marx’s core myth—it could be the 1950s, the 1930s, 1917, or the nineteenth century—they would be able to foresee and influence future political developments. A familiar narrative, they hoped, could guide them through a complex political situation.

## *2. The Neo-Slave Narrative*

A similar phenomenon took place in the African-American literary world at this time. African-American writers also turned to the past in response to the rise and fall of the Black Power movement. Their historical narrative, however, was a more troubling one than the Marxist myth, and neo-slave narrative authors did *not* turn to the slave narrative for comfort. For them, the teleological narrative of literacy and freedom seemed broken in an era when radical ant-racist movements had failed to win full equality and liberation for black Americans. These writers looked to narratives of the past, then, to

demonstrate the fragility of the liberation narrative and the complexity of seemingly stock figures. As a result, black novelists offered a perspective that could have benefited socialist industrializers. The neo-slave narrative anticipated the problems socialists encountered when they viewed their project as a political teleology or a teaching mission.

The neo-slave narrative is typically traced to the 1966 publication of Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*. Walker's novel about the life of slave woman Vyry sparked literary interest in the slave experience, and the trend grew in the 1970s and 1980s with Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*, Alex Haley's *Roots*, Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*, among others. These texts imagine the quotidian experiences of American slaves by resurrecting and responding to the tradition of original slave narratives, which were written by escaped or freed slaves in ante-bellum America as abolitionist tracts. By presenting stories of personal freedom gained, original slave narratives expressed resistant triumph and produced propaganda for anti-slavery politics. Neo-slave narrative writers, on the other hand, accessed this historical moment through time travel, which appears quite literally in both Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*.<sup>11</sup> As they re-wrote slave narratives, often adding psychological and narrative details that were missing from the notoriously brief original slave narratives, neo-slave narrative authors asked readers to reconsider and complicate their political liberation myths.<sup>12</sup> Like socialist industrializers, these artists responded to the Black Power and New Left movements, offering challenges and revisions in order to bolster anti-racist politics as radical movements faded. Just as they spoke to Black Power, these texts could also have spoken to and challenged their socialist contemporaries, allowing them to see the problems of romanticized political mythologies by complicating

such simple narratives. These connections do not appear to have been made, however, as neither socialists nor neo-slave narrative authors reference one another directly.

Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* relates the story of Dana Franklin, an African-American woman writer who is whisked from California in 1976 into ante-bellum Maryland of 1815. Dana's involuntary time travel becomes a pattern in her life, and she soon realizes that it is linked to the survival of her white male ancestor, Rufus Weylin, whose relationship with the black freewoman Alice Greenwood produced Hagar Weylin, the matriarch in Dana's family Bible. Whenever Rufus's life is in danger, from the time of his childhood in 1815 to the birth of Hagar, Dana is pulled back in time by some undescribed force to rescue him. She can return to 1976 only when she feels that her own life is threatened, and although she often spends months in the nineteenth century, almost no time passes in twentieth-century California. Her white husband Kevin, who travels back in time by clinging to Dana during the transition, at one stage becomes trapped in nineteenth-century America for five years without his wife. Dana misses him in 1976 for only eight days. As the novel draws to a close, Dana has witnessed the birth of Hagar by acting as a bystander to Alice's sexual abuse by Rufus, and she has also become the object of Rufus's lust in the wake of Alice's suicide. In the final moments of the novel, Dana murders Rufus as he attempts to rape her, and she loses her arm in the grip of the dying man while she travels back to the twentieth century.

If Butler portrays time travel between two discrete historical points, Ishmael Reed depicts layered, anachronistic time in his novel *Flight to Canada*. Reed's action takes place during the Civil War, but his characters use telephones, ride in cars and airplanes, and watch Barbara Walters on TV. *Flight to Canada* is a satiric, postmodern telling of an

escape made by former slaves Quickskill, Stray Leechfield, and 40s (40s is the character's name) from the plantation of their master Arthur Swille. Swille is a Virginia planter whose son, an anthropologist, was consumed by a crocodile in Africa and whose wife, a suffragette, wastes away in her bed on a hunger strike. Swille's aristocratic plantation, which he refers to as Camelot, masks his sexual deviance. Not only does the master collect whips and watch movies of slaves being beaten, but he maintains a necrophiliac and incestuous relationship with his dead sister Vivian. His daily affairs are managed by the apparently submissive slave Uncle Robin, who, in the eyes of critic Mark Shadle, "'yeses' and 'grins' Swille to death" in the tradition of the Invisible Man's grandfather in Ralph Ellison's classic novel (317). Robin rewrites his master's will so that he inherits everything. Swille dies, in homage to Edgar Allen Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," during a confrontation with what appears to be the ghost of Vivian (it may in fact be one of the other characters imitating her). After Robin's spectacular inheritance, Quickskill returns to the estate to write the former "house slave's" story. In addition to toying with chronological time and referencing white nineteenth-century writers, *Flight to Canada* draws heavily on actual slave narratives, especially that of William Wells Brown, who makes a cameo appearance as himself and also serves as the model for the escaped slave protagonist Raven Quickskill.

In the novels of Reed and Butler, time travel appears simultaneously terrible and necessary. While socialists took pleasure in imagining themselves as historical revolutionary figures or timeless mythological "workers," the process of becoming a slave was a less positive experience. The popularity of the neo-slave narrative in the 1970s and 1980s, however, suggests that there was also a *desire* among African-



American writers to resurrect and imaginatively become the slave. This desire was linked to the core narrative of progress that the slave narrative had espoused. Just as the Marxist myth had yet to succeed, the freedom narrative of literacy and freedom had been triumphant only in individual cases of escape or personal fulfillment—it had not succeeded on a collective level. The neo-slave narrative, then, illustrated the way that African-American politics had obsessively repeated the literary form of the liberation myth in an attempt to finally achieve the teleological ending of collective freedom. Its authors variously replicated such attempts at victory and questioned the feasibility of such a project with more bleak assessments. By focusing on *becoming* the slave rather than simply repeating the freedom myth, moreover, the neo-slave narrative suggested that mythology needed more specificity, more variation, and more interaction with the contemporary moment.

In Butler's text, this repetition of the slave narrative occurs in a literal fashion, as Dana travels back and forth in time, constantly looping back to repeat the experience of slavery. The freedom struggle is ingrained in her identity, and she must return until she has fulfilled the requirements of her own teleological narrative: the one that leads to her birth. Here, Butler makes visible the confusion between personal and collective freedom narratives. In one sense, Dana's story is completely individual. She must save her own life by encouraging the sexual abuse of her ancestral grandmother at the hands of a white slave-owner. The individual's needs, then, corrupt the collective freedom project because they capitalize on the pain of another. At the same time, Dana's personal survival stands in for the collective victories that African-Americans have won by the 1970s, which include freedom from literal bondage and adjudicated segregation, leaving Dana with the

ability to be educated, have a career, and marry a white man by choice. In this sense, individual and collective strategies for liberation intertwine, and Dana's circular returns to the freedom narrative reveal how, despite the failure to reach the teleological point of "true" freedom, each repetition is not fruitless. Although she looks the other way while Rufus forces himself on Alice, she also educates the other slaves so that they may one day be able to escape. Each return to the past, each repetition of the liberation narrative, achieves *something* even if the ultimate goal remains elusive.

This phenomenon may be a commentary on the status of black American politics in 1976. On the one hand, Butler wrote during a moment of frustration and radical decline, a time when African-Americans still suffered immense economic and social discrimination in comparison to whites.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the civil rights movement and Black Power movements *had* resulted in enormous gains for the black community even if they hadn't overturned white hegemony. For Butler, then, returning to the past was a way of acknowledging how black liberation politics constantly repeat the slave narrative's liberation quest. We might see this return to slavery as a traumatic repetition: an involuntary recurring memory of a traumatic moment. Each repetition also represents a *rehearsal* of the larger liberation project—and although each return fails, it does achieve some progress.

Reed's palimpsest of past and present likewise presents the liberation narrative as a kind of obsessive repetition. His novel ends with a repetition, as Raven Quickskill begins work on yet another slave narrative, the story of Uncle Robin. While Butler presents this repetition as a process, no matter how problematic and roundabout, of moving toward liberation and enriching contemporary African-American identity, Reed

seems more pessimistic. Dana was pulled forcibly into the past, but Reed represents the present as though it were a parasite on the narrative of the past. Contemporary media technology and capitalism overdetermine all of the characters' stories: they speak on telephones, watch TV, and use brand name products. Reed portrays personal stories, by contrast, as a basic good: "a man's story is his gris-gris, you know. Taking his story is like taking his gris-gris. [. . .] When you take a man's story, a story that doesn't belong to you, that story will get you" (8-9). This basic "good," however, never seems within reach. When Quickskill finally writes Uncle Robin's story, he declares that he will do so "in such a way that, using a process the old curers used, to lay hands on the story would be lethal to the thief" (Reed 11). Only magic, it appears, can prevent misappropriations of slave history.

With its critique of commercialized and appropriated personal stories, *Flight to Canada* argues that history is always contaminated by contemporary culture: "it will always be a mystery, history" (8). This reading challenges the perspective of many scholars that Reed's temporal *mélange* intends to highlight the continued presence of racial oppression in the present.<sup>14</sup> I suggest that we read *Flight to Canada* as a warning about the intrusion of the present into the past. Technology, media, and corporate products are the primary items that appear anachronistically in *Flight to Canada*, indicating that our understanding of America's slave history is tainted by the forms that transmit or "sell" it. Commercial and public usage is not limited to the present. The original slave narrative, he notes with his depiction of Harriet Beecher Stowe, was also mediated by white editors, ghostwriters, or abolitionist activists, making even those texts somehow "inauthentic." Moreover, the tendency to equate slavery and contemporary

oppression—by, for instance, labeling sell-outs Uncle Toms or “field slaves”—relied on broad generalizations about slave history in order to impact twentieth-century politics. In place of these judgments, Reed seems to value the more complex story, even if his satirical style leads readers to doubt whether we will ever get it.

Reed, then, mocks the mythic slave narrative structure and contemporary appropriations of it even as he participates in the same repetitive process. And although his analysis might be bleak, as he depicts our temporal reality in a *terminal* state of confusion, the ultimate triumph of Uncle Robin over Swille suggests that the progressive freedom narrative has *some* value even in a postmodern text. Reed begins with Quickskill’s more traditional, rebellious escape and then produces a second freedom narrative with the victory of Robin. He, and to some extent Butler, uses such repetition and limited success to break down the teleological nature of the liberation narrative without giving up on the project itself. No matter how skeptical Reed may be, his status as a black American makes him reluctant to give up the liberation dream altogether.

Like socialist projects that responded to the rise and fall of Black Power, neo-slave narratives also commented on these political trends. Ashraf Rushdy convincingly makes this argument in his *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. Although Rushdy recognizes that some writers, including Johnson and Reed, were not wholly sympathetic to black nationalism, he sees the neo-slave narrative form as a continuation of the black nationalist project in a literary and academic setting. Because African-American Studies departments grew quite literally out of black nationalist activism, which demanded and won courses on African-American culture and history after protests across the country, black scholarship inevitably drew on Black

Power ideas.<sup>15</sup> Emerging from and influenced by this political perspective, scholars and artists responded to historical and literary works by white authors that perpetuated stereotypes of black Sambos, black male aggressors, and sexually aggressive black women. William Styron's 1967 novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and Stanley Elkins's 1959 historical treatise *Slavery* became particularly controversial targets. Neo-slave narratives were part of these academic debates, denying the validity of racist white histories with depictions and affirmations of slave humanity.

Reed and Butler did not necessarily see their work as a direct continuation of black nationalism, nor did they share the politics of the IS and the SWP. In fact, Reed had some antagonism toward the Black Arts Movement and black nationalism after participating in such activism during the mid-1960s. As Rushdy notes, at the time Reed wrote *Flight to Canada*, "he was somewhere between disaffection and reconciliation" with the Black Power movement (99). Octavia Butler, on the other hand, did not foreground her political affiliations, yet her novels often usefully spoke to critical political issues of the day, addressing feminism and race politics as well as economic injustice. Instead of representing a continuation of Black Power politics, I view Butler and Reed's novels as part of a struggle to deal with the evolution away from Black Power. As their novels reflect, both authors had ambiguous feelings about these new political developments.

For my purposes, Ashraf Rushdy's most useful observation is that neo-slave narratives often recuperated the "Uncle Tom" and "Mammy" figures whom Black Power radicals had deemed sell-outs and Malcolm X had rejected as collaborationist "house slaves." Black nationalists honored slave rebels like Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey as

iconic hero figures, but they often rejected their parents and grandparents as politically conservative, constructing *themselves* as the first generation of true black rebels. Black Power terms of scorn, then, emerged out of slave history rather than contemporary twentieth-century culture: a counter-revolutionary was an Uncle Tom, a “house slave,” or a “house nigger.”

Such terms tempered the celebration of slave rebellion by locating the originary moment of African-American *betrayal* in slavery. In African-American history, the slave carried the greatest potential for triumphant rebellion. Unlike Marx’s workers, however, who had yet to live up to their reputation, American slaves had historically failed to win freedom through collective black rebellion, and so although the slave was a source of identification and sympathy, she was also a cause of political frustration. Novelists like Butler and Reed sought to construct a heroic black radicalism in slave history while also rejecting the demarcations that ‘60s activists had made between “revolutionaries” and “sell-outs.” In fact, Octavia Butler remarks that Black Power’s rejection of its elders directly inspired *Kindred*:

*Kindred* was a kind of reaction to some of the things going on during the sixties when people were feeling ashamed of, or more strongly, angry with their parents for not having improved things faster, and I wanted to take a person from today and send that person back to slavery. (Kenan 496)

Butler’s novel rejects the Black Power movement’s generational hierarchy and what she sees as a simplified vision of slave history. *Kindred*, however, does not fully revive the historical slave figure as the repository of radical knowledge or black identity. Dana brings her education and her will to rebellion into ante-bellum Maryland, and this fact

suggests that Butler's recuperation is also a revision and an improvement on slave resistance.

### **A Colonizing Mission: Creating the More Perfect Rebel**

As this temptation toward *improving* slave rebellion suggests, the neo-slave narrative and the socialist industrializing project were rooted in notions of political education. Neo-slave narratives are an unusual means of recuperating inter-generational understanding because original slave narratives do exist. The production of *new* slave narratives, then, indicates that there is something missing or inadequate about the original texts. And, to a certain extent, this is true. Many original slave narratives were mediated, edited, or ghost-written by white patrons, and their use as abolitionist documents led authors to focus on the clearest examples of slavery's unethical nature, often leaving out more nuanced expressions of the human experience. Yet original slave narratives also offered some semblance of historical accuracy, whereas neo-slave narratives tended to depict the process of becoming a *more perfect, more successful* slave. Despite the fact that Sherley Anne Williams based her novels on real events and Toni Morrison took on the most challenging of historical moments when she depicted the murderous acts of a desperate slave mother, these texts do not re-value the *real* Uncle Tom, Mammy, or slave mother but the imagined versions of these figures. Williams's protagonist Dessa Rose rebels while pregnant and ultimately triumphs against white America by escaping to the West, and Morrison's Sethe not only succeeds in winning freedom for herself and her children with her murderous act, she also finally wins the love of Paul D and the forgiveness of the townspeople. Reed's slaves are similarly victorious in their fight against Swille, whether they rebel with "yeses" or with "no's." The happy resolutions to

these stories indicate that, even if neo-slave narrative authors hoped to critique the generational prejudice that Black Power activists expressed, they couldn't resist presenting twentieth-century visions of the freedom narrative as better strategies for rebellion.

The freedom narrative and the Marxist myth require both knowledge of one's position in the story and deliberate action to achieve success. As a result, for writers and activists with a stake in political victory, the act of becoming a slave or a worker also meant perfecting the actions and analyses of slaves and workers. Becoming, in other words, included educating. For socialists, this teaching mission was reflected in attempts to build class consciousness and to "colonize" workplaces with socialist bodies and socialist thoughts. For writers, the neo-slave narrative both celebrated the original slave narrative and replaced it with the political and social analyses of twentieth-century artists. By foregrounding the interaction between twentieth-century black Americans and slaves, however, Octavia Butler makes visible the way teaching quickly morphs into learning for the confident interloper. Socialist industrializers would discover the same thing when they encountered the realities of the workplace.

Butler presents Dana not as a black radical but simply as a modern black woman who, although she does not choose to transport herself into the nineteenth century, initially feels she has something to teach her ancestors (both white and black) when she arrives. In many ways, she does offer productive instruction. She tries to change Rufus's racist speech; she uses her limited twentieth-century medical knowledge to save lives; and she covertly teaches slave children how to read. During her returns to 1976 California, she reads extensively about slave history and slave escapes to prepare herself



for future trips, and when she arrives in Maryland, she scorns the Weylins' cook Sarah, whom she views as nothing more than an obedient Mammy figure.

Dana values her education largely because she sees it as a key to more successful rebellion, and she initially feels that it separates her from the Weylin slaves. "We were actors," she remarks of herself and Kevin. "While we waited to go home, we humored the people around us by pretending to be like them. But we were poor actors. We never really got into our role. We never forgot that we were acting" (98). After witnessing Alice's severe beating following an escape attempt and later experiencing the same abuse herself, however, Dana finds herself transitioning from an actor to a slave, and she begins to behave more and more like Sarah. She realizes that her education has not improved her rebellious skills, and her valuation of slave resistance has not made her capable of withstanding the physical and mental torture that accompanies it:

We'd [Alice and Dana] both run and been brought back, she in days, I in only hours. I probably knew more than she did about the general layout of the Eastern Shore. She knew only the area she'd been born and raised in, and she couldn't read a map. I knew about towns and rivers miles away—and it hadn't done me a damned bit of good! [. . .] Yet in a few years an illiterate runaway named Harriet Tubman would make nineteen trips into this country and lead three hundred fugitives to freedom. What had I done wrong? [. . .] I tried to get away from my thoughts, but they still came. *See how easily slaves are made?* They said. (177)

Dana has the ability to "read a map," analyzing both her geographical location and her social or political situation; she has a sense of herself within the larger narrative of slavery and the freedom struggle. The immediacy and reality of the situation, including emotional and bodily fears, however, leave her without a metaphorical map for escape. And without a map or script, Dana loses her actor status. She realizes that, if "slaves are

made” by their situation, then she has *become* a slave rather than a twentieth-century woman playing a part. As a slave, she finds that resistance is much more difficult.

After Alice has been caught and beaten, Dana takes on Sarah’s role—the role that Dana had once scorned as a “Mammy” position. “If you two don’t get into the house with that food . . .!” she yells at two small slave boys. “You sound just like Sarah,” they reply (159). Alice accuses her more directly of selling out: “that’s what you for—to help white folks keep niggers down. [ . . . ] They be calling you mammy in a few years” (167). As a woman from the 1970s, Dana is leery of the “Mammy” figure because she has imbibed the Black Power movement’s liberation narrative and its dismissal of passive figures. Armed with the knowledge of historical slave escapes and rebellions and the political belief that such behavior was necessary, she feels that her perspective should trump Sarah’s.

For her fellow slaves, however, the distinctions between Dana as a twentieth-century woman and Dana as a “Mammy” are not so clear. Although they do begin accusing her of sounding like Sarah when she takes on Sarah’s tasks, they see Dana as a “house slave” long before she sees herself as one. From their perspective, she shares many of the same traits: she sleeps in the same room as her owner (actually her husband), she reads and writes, she speaks like the white slavemasters, and she spends a great deal of time in the plantation house serving the masters directly. Although Dana feels closely identified with the slaves, then, they do not initially feel such affection for her. When she first enters the cookhouse, she assumes that she has come to a safe place: “the cookhouse looked like the friendliest place I’d seen since I arrived” (72). But the other slaves are not as welcoming as she expected: “the warmth I’d felt when I came into the room,” she

remarks, “was turning out to be nothing more than the heat of the fire” (74). Even when she still sees herself as a twentieth-century woman acting the part of a slave, she appears to the slaves as a sell-out and a collaborator. Alice’s accusation, though it occurs after Dana’s personal sense of transformation, refers less to her status as a cook and household manager than to her tendency to help Rufus even if it puts Alice at risk. Thus, although the twentieth-century woman questions the “Mammy” figure on an ideological level, her own lack of slave “authenticity” puts her into the same position. In Butler’s text, twentieth-century newcomers are not simply the bearers of wisdom—they bring problems, misinterpretations, and inadequate analyses. Dana only begins to build real, non-patronizing relationships with fellow slaves after she accepts her inevitable contamination by the twentieth century’s liberation narrative and the nineteenth century’s “Mammy” figure.

Through these representations, Butler complicates the “Mammy” figure. Although the “Mammy” continues to stand for complicity in the eyes of the boys and Alice, the resistant counterpoint is not so easy to find. Alice saves herself by becoming Rufus’s concubine; Dana tries to “talk like white folks”; and rebellious men like Nigel’s father or Alice’s husband Isaac are sold away from their families, in Isaac’s case after being severely maimed (74, 149). None of these figures make an argument for the ultimate value of either resistance or passivity. Butler’s Mammy, then, is a complex, human character. Dana *does* have something to teach the slaves, but Sarah also has something to teach Dana: “Sarah had managed to overcome my uncertainty, my ignorance of cooking on an open hearth and teach me quite a bit,” she remarks (160). Ultimately, Dana’s greatest moment of resistance—stabbing Rufus—occurs after she has taken on Sarah’s

role. We could read this either as a rejection of the “Mammy” role or we could, perhaps more productively, see it as a recognition that taking on this role does not negate one’s potential for rebellion.

Reed’s “Uncle Tom” figure, Uncle Robin, offers a similar perspective on both recuperating maligned figures and questioning the educational role of activism. Reed positions *Flight to Canada* at the juncture of two didactic literary pieces: Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and a group of original slave narratives. Stowe’s text, like the vast majority of slave narratives, was intended to be a pedagogical, abolitionist piece, and Reed concentrates on breaking down the aura of truth around such educational tracts. Stowe appears as “Naughty Harriet,” a writer whose patronizing abolitionism made her a fortune while the real inspiration for Uncle Tom, Josiah Henson (who, far from obliging his masters, had run to Canada), earned no profit from the story.

This is not the only educational project that appears suspect in Reed’s text. Swille’s son, for instance, goes on an apparently academic trip to Africa as an anthropologist, but he does so only for capitalist gain: “What a cover. Anthropologists. We used to send priests, but they were too obvious,” Swille remarks (34). Similarly, when Swille dies, his will (which may reflect his own wishes or the wishes of Uncle Robin, who altered the will) provides for the formation of a school for black children, run by Mammy Barracuda, which will relieve them of their “barbarous” ways. “So that this school might be truly structured,” the will reads, “I leave my closetful of precious whips and all of my fettering devices to Mammy” (168). In these cases, Reed targets white “education” as a means of propagating racist structures, whether economic or cultural.

This process applies to abolitionist educators as well as slaveholding educators, both of whom appear to be driven primarily by economic interests.

This kind of education, Reed insists, prevents the slave characters from owning, writing, and distributing their own stories. And although reading and writing appear to be positive traits, as Robin employs them to outwit Swille, even education conducted by slaves does not appear as an ultimate good. In his introductory poem, “Flight to Canada” Quickskill declares that, as he steps off the plane into freedom, “within ten minutes I had / Signed up for three anti-slavery lectures. Remind me to get an / Agent” (3). Although we might forgive Quickskill, as an escaped slave, for seeing lectures as a money-making venture, the use of the term “agent” suggests that this Quickskill envisions a professional marketing venture in which he “sells” himself in the capitalist marketplace. Having broken down the positive connotations of education, Reed offers a satirical, twisting alternative to the didactic slave narrative that questions the supposed purity of pedagogical impulses.

Reed is similarly caustic in critiquing Black Power politics for its rejection of the Uncle Tom figure. He depicts Robin and his wife Aunt Judy, for instance, drinking champagne in their slave “penthouse”: “This is where all the Uncles and Aunties who work in the Great Castle live,” the narrator tells us (56). The assumption that house slaves collaborate with their masters, Reed suggests, requires radicals to recycle the notion of the happy and well-cared-for slave. Unlike Butler, however, Reed offers little nuance to such critiques. His humorous text mocks the problems of abolitionism, the slave narrative, and Black Power without presenting a clear alternative. If education is suspect, Reed refuses to offer his readers a more productive path.

Nonetheless, both Butler and Reed could have provided a useful reality check for socialists moving into industrial workplaces. Socialists entered industry with an attitude much like Dana's initial one: they saw themselves as teachers and potential leaders of the working class. As a result, the IS structured its newspaper around education by developing "class struggle unionism" language, a style they hoped would make socialism accessible to working-class people. SWP leader Jack Barnes took this desire for education even further, suggesting that the working class needed the SWP if it hoped to succeed. If socialists did not make the "turn to industry," he declared, "our program, which the world proletariat needs to chart a course to victory, will remain a lifeless document" (Barnes, "The Turn to Industry" 48). The SWP expressed its pedagogical and visionary role metaphorically as well. Members spoke of "colonizing" workplaces with radicals, evoking the Western history of sending "civilized" people to live in "primitive" locations as a means of building and enforcing imperial rule. Like colonists migrating to another country, SWPers moved into industrial spaces, interacting with, leading, teaching, and becoming working-class people.

Many of the activists whom I interviewed resisted reading "colonization" through the lens of imperialism or colonialism. Former SWPer Paul Le Blanc equated it to a dead metaphor like "rule of thumb," which is sometimes traced to a defunct law that permitted spousal abuse on the condition that the rod was no thicker than a thumb (Le Blanc, Interview).<sup>16</sup> But in 1970s America, "colonization" was *not* a dead metaphor. It was, in fact, a key term in the leftist vocabulary. During the 1960s, the Black Panthers and the Chicano movement had identified black and Chicano communities as victims of "internal colonialism," and anti-colonial movements around the world had revived and inspired

American socialists' dreams of international revolution. If the term simply survived as a remnant of the CPUSA's depression-era language, when American radicals may have been less conscious of anti-colonial movements as potential revolutionary allies, then the SWP of the 1970s was clearly not adept at analyzing and updating its rhetoric. The IS, on the other hand, *had* made this leap by jettisoning "colonizing" for the term "industrializing."

Moreover, the CP of the 1930s had not used "colonizing" in a neutral way—it had indeed carried imperial connotations. Stella Nowicki, a member of the CP's youth group, the Young Communist League [YCL], who "colonized" in the 1930s in Chicago's stockyards, commented that "the colonizers were like red missionaries." (Lynd and Lynd 72). Describing attempts to maintain a job and spread radicalism among workers, Nowicki equates incoming communists with Christians who live among a local population and convert them to a particular belief system. Workers, if they were to lead a socialist revolution, would need to develop class consciousness, and implanted radicals hoped to foster and teach this. Former SWPers Le Blanc and Dianne Feeley confirmed the connection by invoking the same metaphor to describe their discomfort with the on-the-job tactics of some of their comrades: both remarked that they were embarrassed to see fellow SWPers behave like "Jehovah's witnesses" (Le Blanc, Interview; Feeley).

Unlike imperialist colonizers and even some missionaries, of course, SWP members in factories did not have economic and social power over their co-workers. Colonialism is an economic and political system, not a metaphor, and it is worth emphasizing that SWP members did not work to dominate or exploit fellow workers. In fact, their radical politics made them likely targets for the real economic and political

power of the bosses. Their status as “colonists,” in other words, did not come with colonial privileges. The problem, then, lay not so much with the political actions of the SWP in taking factory jobs but in the organization’s choice of language to describe it. In the Cold War era, the US government presented communism as a virus that could brainwash innocents and communists as “infiltrators” or “outside agitators.” As self-proclaimed “colonizers,” SWP members allowed their own rhetoric to reinforce the government’s scare tactics. The term “colonizing,” whether socialists intended it in this way or not, enhanced the sense of distance between activists and workers. Imperialism fostered distinctions between “civilization” and the “primitive” by implanting Western culture and Western people into colonial locations, and the notion of colonizing workplaces similarly suggested that activists had come to “live” among workers in order to urge them out of “primitive” political stasis. It announced, moreover, the same kind of “inauthenticity” that Butler’s Dana confronted in her interactions with other slaves. Because colonizers are *travelers* who immigrate into their new social situation, they do not necessarily adopt the identity of those around them. Like Dana, they might seem or feel like nothing more than “actors” whose job is to perform and teach rather than to participate.

Socialist organizations played with the “colonizing” metaphor by viewing their project simultaneously as an educational mission and a participatory venture. On the one hand, they believed the working class needed education about Marxism, international politics, domestic events, union-management relations, union bureaucracy, racism, and sexism. The SWP, like many socialist organizations, subscribed to the Leninist principle that one revolutionary party would act as the vanguard of the revolution, and as a result, it



judged the Party to be a revolutionary force at least as significant as the unions or workers it joined. On the other hand, the SWP and the IS (which did not consider itself the one vanguard party) entered unions because they considered the workers the leaders of revolution. Spontaneous worker rebellion, they thought, would spark the revolution—and they didn't want to miss the action.

In their role as educators, socialists spent their time performing socialism on the shop floor and teaching it through publications. Thus, both the SWP and the IS put a great deal of energy into creating newspapers for a working-class audience, and they distributed these papers at leftist demonstrations, through door-to-door sales, outside factory gates, and sometimes within workplaces. The SWP published *The Militant*, a weekly newspaper that typically ran 25-30 pages by the time the “turn to industry” began, while the IS released *Workers Power*, which variously appeared as a 16-page weekly, a 20-page biweekly, and an 8-12-page biweekly.<sup>17</sup> Although *Workers' Power* stressed that its “class struggle unionism” language was a teaching tool, it was *The Militant* that exemplified the desire to create a more perfect working class. The SWP's newspaper attempted to educate readers about socialist politics through reports on labor struggles, extensive articles on international politics, and regular columns such as “Our Revolutionary Heritage” and “Learning about Socialism.” The SWP always ran candidates for local and national elections, including the presidential election, and SWP campaigns facilitated political education both in newspaper articles and in petition drives designed to put candidates on the ballot.

*The Militant* couldn't simply produce educational material. It also needed to display the pedagogical success of its project. As a result, articles often focused on the

opinions of SWP members' co-workers. If the newspaper could prove that, in 1980, workers were opposed to war with Iran or to nuclear power, then radicalism must be spreading. Consequently, even articles that ostensibly had nothing to do with worker opinions often veered in this direction. An interview with SWP member Marian Bustin that purported to address threats to her American residency, for example, actually served as a forum for discussions of Bustin's co-workers in a West Virginia mine. While the first four questions were devoted to Bustin's life (only the first addressed her immigration status), the last four concerned the opinions of her fellow miners on the upcoming contract fight, the women's movement, the draft, and nuclear power ("Coal Miner Fights Deportation" 12-13). Another article similarly interviewed industrialized YSA members about the opinions of their colleagues on Iran.<sup>18</sup> "Every black worker I've talked to says to send back the shah," one member proudly reported, while another commented that a tack welder at his shipyard had "[come] down a level of the ship to get me to come up and there to talk to this shipfitter about what I know on Iran" (Singer 5). In these cases, industrialized members used their presence in the working class to act as gauges of international class consciousness, and they publicized the positive responses they received as "proof" of the SWP's success in its teaching mission.

In these examples, the SWP demonstrates its success through the progress of its students, and class consciousness is judged not by the concrete ability to fight for one's rights but by the tendency to express certain opinions on international politics that suited the SWP's ideology. Such obsession with specific forms of worker education elicited mixed feelings among SWP members. Debby Pope, for instance, remembers working on the railroad in Chicago as a political disaster: "The idea that most of my coworkers were

ready to hear about socialism or that I could reach out to them about something like the Cuban revolution or Fidel Castro—it was preposterous! I could barely talk to these guys about how I’d been involved in an antiwar movement.” Paul Le Blanc, on the other hand, reflects that “I don’t see it as elitist or vanguardist just because there are some people who come to certain ideas and try to win other people to that.” In fact, he remarks, this is an argument used to justify the status quo because it discourages people from exploring dissent and analysis. Nonetheless, Le Blanc remembers that his comrades didn’t always teach socialist ideas in productive ways:

You know that it’s one thing to talk to a couple of other students on and on and on about politics late into the night, on and on, and also wearing your button and handing out flyers all the time and selling the paper, but there were some people who did that on the job. There was a phrase used in the party, “talk socialism to workers,” and there’s a validity to that. We should be in the workplace, and we should talk to workers, our coworkers, about various ideas and, in that context, begin to talk about how we see things as socialists, not keeping that under wraps, but being prepared to talk about that in ways that can make sense to workers. But for some people, many people, at least some people, talking socialism to workers was like this nonstop thing, like they’re wearing a neon sign: socialism, socialism, socialism, all the time. It was ridiculous, and they were seen as fools. (Interview)

Le Blanc’s hesitations between “some people,” “many people,” and “some people” reflect the difficulties the Party had in balancing its understanding of itself as a vanguard party made up of socialist teachers and a party that *became* workers. As he wavered in describing how many SWPers acted in what way, he indicated how SWP ideology overdetermined concrete, particular actions. Although he believes it was only “some people” who acted badly, it felt more widespread because the organization’s ideology encouraged such behavior.<sup>19</sup>

While Pope saw this as a fundamental problem with the industrialization program, Le Blanc and Dianne Feeley remained optimistic about industrialization but frustrated

with the SWP's approach to education. They felt that, although education remained important, on-the-job activism was a two-way learning process. Just as Butler had demonstrated how reconstructing the slave narrative meant confronting the political problems of the Mammy, Le Blanc and Feeley started to see the same thing in their work at Ford's Metuchen, New Jersey auto plant. As workers in the plant between 1979 and 1980, Feeley and Le Blanc talked politics with their co-workers regularly. They ran into trouble in 1980, however, when Ford announced the closing of a nearby plant in Mahwah. Negotiations between Ford and the UAW determined that workers from Mahwah holding positions of high seniority would displace newly hired employees at Metuchen. This posed a quandary. Socialists generally supported seniority, and the SWP did not want to see Mahwah workers lose their jobs. But at Metuchen as around the country, young auto workers included many women and people of color, while senior workers were more likely to be white and male.

Faced with this situation, the SWP leadership was at a loss: it had nothing to teach. It could only offer stock answers from its broad political program, instructing its cadres to continue selling *The Militant* and to advocate the socialist program of 30 hours work for 40 hours pay. Le Blanc and Feeley were furious. As Feeley remarks, "how could we have a position on the Iranian revolution but not have a position on what should be happening in our own plant?!" The issue, Le Blanc recalls, was urgent for militants in the plant because it represented the first time that workers had approached SWP members for advice: "workers were asking us because we were known, some of us, as having all kinds of opinions. [ . . . ] In conversations over lunch or on the line a little bit we shared opinions, so people were curious to know, what's your opinion? What do you think about

this?” Although Feeley felt that older workers should not be able to displace the younger ones, Le Blanc was not so certain. And the SWP leadership refused to take a formal position, leaving its members in the middle of a politically charged workplace with no plan and no political analysis (Feeley; Le Blanc, Interview).

Feeley and Le Blanc’s solution was to turn to co-workers for advice. Feeley suggested holding a forum of all auto workers in the area to discuss the problem and determine a collective solution. Although the SWP leadership initially rejected the idea, it quickly reversed itself, adopting the plan as though the leadership, not Feeley and Le Blanc, had introduced it. Feeley ignored the slight because she “felt that this was the political moment. Whereas people hadn’t really wanted to talk about politics, suddenly all night long all we did was talk about politics.” The proposed meeting, however, never happened. When SWPers introduced the idea at a local union meeting, the union’s regional director prevented the membership from voting on it, and the workers from Mahwah were brought in to displace younger workers with no more debate.

While Feeley insists that “the SWP didn’t really learn much from that experience,” she and Le Blanc certainly did. Like Octavia Butler’s Dana, they found that their intellectual background and Marxist education did not make them experts at working-class politics. They had to compromise their revolutionary priorities to deal with the quotidian problems of particular workers in specific plants. Thus, they had to minimize the damage of plant closings or lay-offs instead of striking for a reduced work week, and in the process they developed more complicated understandings of both working-class people and their political challenges. The shift from imagining the working class to becoming the working class forced many participants—if not necessarily the

organizations themselves—to modify their mythologized understandings of how one would both become and teach industrial workers.

### **Hands, Fists, and Arms: The Industrial Body and the Enslaved Body**

If the SWP's reference to "colonizing" stressed the educational mission of the socialist industrial project, the IS's trope of "industrializing" asked members to identify with the entire economic process of capitalist industry. Metaphorically speaking, ISers became the machine or the economic system rather than the workers. This made sense for socialists, who believed adamantly in the role of systems and collectives rather than individuals in changing the status quo. In the context of individual activists entering workplaces, however, the term left out the realities of personal interaction and concrete experience. For the IS, the program *sounded* like a theoretical project rather than a pragmatic one. In reality, of course, just like members of the SWP, IS cadres discovered that their lives had to be particular rather than universal. They faced the quotidian stress of work, and they built relationships with actual coworkers, not the cartoon images of workers that appeared on the pages of *Workers' Power* or the internal Discussion Bulletins. Moreover, becoming a worker entailed both the particular concerns of social relationships and a *bodily* commitment to physical labor. This is where the socialist industrializing project responded in a productive way to the neo-slave narrative because, despite authorial interest in the body as a site of contact between past and present, the socialist project made its focus on the body concrete. Although neo-slave narratives were concerned with the role of the body in race politics, they also used historical and intellectual projects to distance themselves from the vulnerable racialized body. As members of a group whose oppression has been so physical, they certainly cannot be

blamed. Socialists during this period, however, offered to put their own bodies “on the line”—not, in the way the Weather Underground had offered, as political terrorists, but as workers on the literal or metaphorical assembly line. When black writers stepped back from embodied activism, turning to academia after the turmoil of Black Power, socialists insisted upon the importance of maintaining actual rather than imagined bodies in the political arena. Instead of a judgment on black academics, this was an acknowledgement that, for most people of color, poor people, and women, a retreat from actual embodiment into academia’s theories of embodiment could never be a comprehensive solution.

Although I have thus far focused largely on the narratives of industrializing or colonizing workplaces that led socialists to think romantically or unrealistically about the process, most IS and SWP members juggled their mythic narratives with a clear understanding of pragmatic decisions.<sup>20</sup> This was one of the major reasons that both organizations had difficulty implementing their industrialization policies. Industrializing was *not* simply a theoretical political argument. It required members to change their lifestyles, and many were apprehensive about the concrete realities of this choice even before they entered the shop floor. Most of the young members in the IS and the SWP had attended or graduated from college, and although some came from working-class backgrounds, most had been raised to aspire to more intellectual professions. As a result, although the IS’s initial plan for industrialization was met with enthusiasm by members, its implementation was a constant source of internal strife. Discussion documents within the group often exerted pressure on those who had not industrialized, acknowledging the anxiety of some members while demanding that they overcome it. As IS member J.W.<sup>21</sup> insisted in 1971:

Industrial work is no more unpalatable to the average ISer than it is to 99% of those engaged in doing it. Almost no one works on an assembly line by choice. If anything, a radical political-intellectual background [sic] makes industrial work easier, not harder. ISers will find the work less alienating because they will have a reason for being on the job above and beyond selling their alienated labor power in order to provide the necessities of life for themselves and their families.

Of course, the IS *was* asking its members to take assembly line jobs voluntarily, so J.W.'s argument assumed that IS members would and should be willing to sacrifice by joining the industrial workforce. ISers were told to "put your body on the assembly line"—with any risks and personal sacrifices that might require. The fact that so many comrades hesitated to make this leap, however, suggested that there remained a disjuncture between the narrative of working-class heroism and the physical reality of moving into such jobs.<sup>22</sup>

This anxiety sprung largely from the relationship between ideology and the body. Those who decided to enter industry were worried about how their bodies would be marked, strained, or injured by the transition. Dianne Feeley, who had just recovered from a severe illness, was afraid her body would be unable to handle the work, and Elissa Karg was terrified by a rumor that a man's head had been cut off in a press during her first week at a Detroit auto plant. ISer Wendy Thompson similarly recalls the moment of entering the factory for the first time as a physically threatening moment: "It was absolutely scary. I remember the noise of the metal clanging on the conveyor belts that are over your head. I thought, oh my God, it's going to fall on me. It was scary but it was also fascinating" (Feeley; Thompson). The threats to the body deterred some from joining the industrial workforce altogether. ISer David Finkel, for instance, who worked instead for the organization's National Office as a staff member, remarked that he "didn't really



consider going into a factory because if you've ever seen me with machinery you would understand. You know, it would not have been safe for me or for anyone around me" (Finkel, Interview). For others, like Elissa Karg and Debby Pope, the physical labor eventually became overwhelming. They found it physically taxing and boring, and both women mentioned the physical strain of doing political work in harsh weather while pregnant as a major factor in their dissatisfaction. No matter how politically sound the industrialization project, then, its physical toll was a deterrent to many. These members did not abandon their socialist politics, although many later pursued other occupations: Paul Le Blanc went to graduate school and became a history professor, Elissa Karg became a health care worker, and Debby Pope returned to school and became a teacher.<sup>23</sup>

Some, however, found that industrial work increased their sense of physical and political power. When Wendy Thompson walked into the auto plant for the first time, she felt that it was both scary and "fascinating," Iser turned truck driver Frank Thompson was excited by the prospect of using skills from growing up on a farm to operate major machinery, and Dianne Feeley and Paul Le Blanc were proud that they were physically capable workers. Le Blanc explains:

I'm not extolling the virtues of working on the assembly line and being super-exploited, but there was a certain pride that we earned every penny we made and then some. But there was also a sense of genuine solidarity on the line with other workers, and even workers you didn't know—you'd be walking down the hall to the lunchroom and you and a worker coming the other way would say hi, and you didn't know that person, but it just felt good it felt good to affirm your humanity. (Le Blanc, Interview)

The physical work and the collective experience of the assembly line, which needed *every* worker to perform her task according to schedule if the line was to operate smoothly, generated a thrilling sense of solidarity. This process embodied workers as a

whole rather than as individuals. Literalizing the IS's term "industrializing," workers became limbs of the assembly line's enormous body. Their physical labor initiated them into a collective working "body."

Dianne Feeley expands upon this metaphor when she describes passing her probationary period at the auto plant:

That was a wonderful experience that I think anybody in industry feels—but especially a woman. That you can handle the work—that you find a way of being able to handle the work, of being able to handle the challenges of using your body, because you really are hands, and the line went 58 [cars] an hour, so you had to basically do your job in a minute and ten seconds. And that was a great sense of pride to me, to be able to do my job.

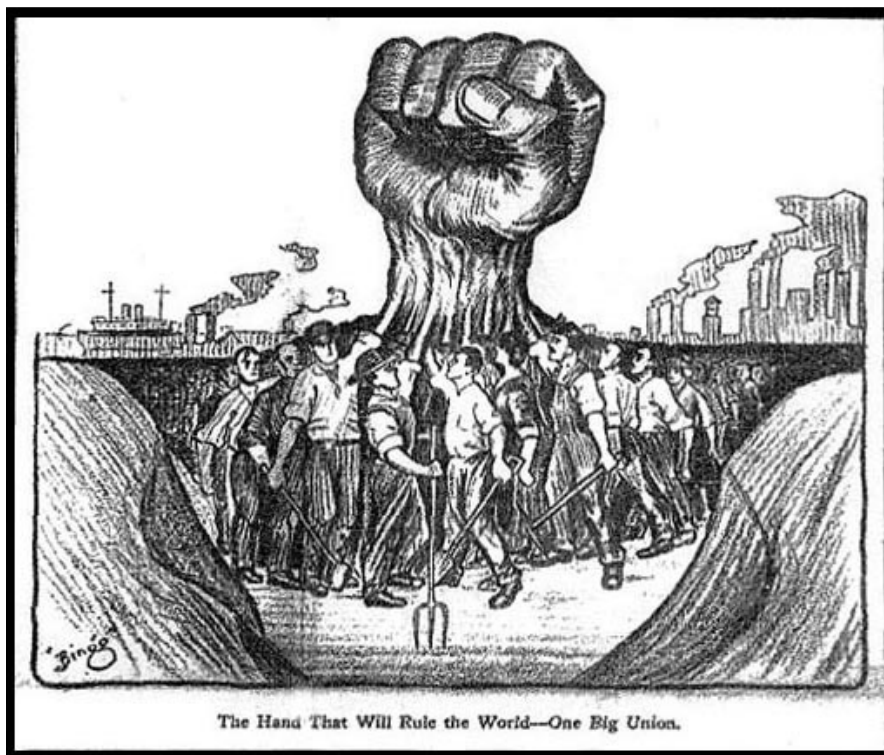
Feeley's expression of satisfaction circles around the comment that "you really are hands." Just as Le Blanc had remarked that the auto plant generated a sense of collective humanity, Feeley describes herself as a pair of "hands" contributing to the enormous assembly line machine. While the expression "hands" usually disembodies the individual, making her simply one node in the larger structure, Feeley's repetition of "handle the work" and "do my job" suggests a sense of physical agency even within the regimented and dehumanizing assembly line.

In fact, disembodied hands have a great deal of metaphorical currency for socialists. The raised fist was a generic symbol of radicalism that had preceded the SWP and the IS, and this figure had been modified over the years by a plethora of organizations. Black Power displayed the black fist, the women's movement portrayed a fist rising out of the symbol for woman, and the IS produced a fist holding a wrench. In these cases organizations imagine their members becoming as strong and capable as the fist. A 1917 drawing, created by International Workers of the World [IWW] artist Ralph

Chapin, illustrates this quite literally. In this image, a large number of workers stand in a hole that they have apparently dug. Each one holds a shovel, pitchfork, or pick in one hand and raises his other hand to the sky. Together, the raised hands form one enormous fist that rises above the level of the land, dwarfing the buildings and smokestacks in the distance. The many separate hands appear in the wrist of the giant fist as though they were veins in the united body. The caption to the IWW image identifies the fist as “the hand that will rule the world—one big union.” Based on this text, the collective fist represents physical labor and political power. Even when confronted with the industrial infrastructure around it, the human aspect triumphs. In Feeley’s case, her “hand” had this power as well because it ran the machine. If even one hand was missing, the assembly line failed to run properly. And in cases of individual rebellion, one person could disrupt the flow of the entire line. As workers industrialized, then, they finally ripped apart the IS metaphor of industrialization: it was not they who became “industrial”—it was the industrial system that suddenly seemed human, run by a collection of human hands.

Octavia Butler similarly depicts embodiment, especially hands and arms, as an indicator of agency in *Kindred*. For Butler, the physical consequences of slavery and racism in the twentieth century appear in the first words of the novel. We learn that Dana has lost her left arm at the elbow during an encounter with her ancestors. Here, as elsewhere in the text, the process of affirming and understanding her African-American identity requires constant *physical* battle with the past. Each time she returns to California, she carries new bruises from her encounters with white slavemasters in the nineteenth century. In fact, she must fear for her life in order to return to the twentieth century, so physical injury and threat become fundamental to the time travel process. She

can *only* return to the present if she has put her body on the line and become scarred: she might wish to remain an observer, but she is forced to participate. Because Dana fights for her own survival based on the survival of her ancestors, Butler seems to be arguing that the construction of African-American identity in the 1970s requires a physical, scarring confrontation with the historical trauma of rape between masters and slaves, failed resistance, or resistance left untried for fear of its physical and emotional consequences. Black identity and black resistance did not emerge in the 1960s and 1970s independently from this history, she suggests, and contemporary activists cannot simply reject or paper over its most painful aspects.



**Fig. 7. Ralph Chapin's IWW illustration: "The Hand That Will Rule the World—One Big Union"**

Butler's focus on hands and arms mimics the socialist realization that, by becoming a worker or a slave, you become both a working, disembodied "hand" and a

pair of “hands” with agency. Butler’s distinction between Dana’s hands and the slaves as “hands,” however, reminds readers of Dana’s status as an “inauthentic” slave. Because Dana knows that slaves will eventually earn their freedom (even if that freedom is limited and unsatisfactory), she feels a sense of agency and hope that original slaves might not. The same is true of Feeley and Le Blanc, who imagine their days at the auto plant as an expression of solidarity in the larger struggle, not simply as a tiring and physically dangerous dead-end job. In *Kindred*, Butler portrays this distinction by emphasizing the differences in physical agency between Dana and the slaves. She depicts the slaves as *nothing but* hands. Her narrator regularly describes the plantation’s field workers as “field hands,” and when Dana comes across the children of the slave hands playing one day, she sees them acting out transactions on the auction block, analyzing one another’s physical features as tools of labor rather than indicators of humanity.

Dana, by contrast, is more than simply “hands,” even to her white abusers. She has education, advanced medical skills compared to nineteenth-century doctors, and “magic” based on her time traveling abilities. Despite her physical helplessness in time travel, Dana maintains a sense of agency about her body. After she learns that her body is the center and the meaning of time travel, she teaches herself to control that travel more effectively. She attaches a bag of supplies to herself and allows her husband to cling to her when the time travel happens, giving her tools and support when she arrives in the past. After this realization, she is no longer *simply* a body. Similarly, although her return to California requires a fear of death, she learns to take control of this, too, plotting methods of “suicide” that are likely to take her home while leaving her in a position to be rescued when she arrives.

If Butler views education as a limited good in *Kindred*, the gap between Dana's agency and the slaves' lack of agency similarly emerges as a problem. When she reluctantly attempts suicide, she does so by slitting her wrists, foreshadowing the loss of her arm that occurs at the end of the novel. Dana's resort to suicide is not simply a method of control. It is also an expression of her desperation. Although her early trips to the South had focused mostly on saving Rufus, educating him, and attempting to educate other slaves, by this point in the novel Dana has begun to facilitate Rufus's sexual abuse of Alice. And, because Rufus notes that Alice and Dana are "One woman. Two halves of a whole," Dana feels that she has lost control and begun to betray both herself and her fellow slaves (257). She feels especially guilty when Rufus sends Alice's children away and Alice responds by hanging herself. Dana atones for this by slitting her wrists—attacking the source of her agency while mimicking the suicidal behavior of her double. Even as she does so, however, she returns home, suggesting that she cannot shed her twentieth-century privilege so easily.

Unable to negate her agency, Dana tries to redeem herself by resisting Rufus. Because he sees her as Alice's twin, Rufus looks to Dana for sexual satisfaction. She is tempted to respond as Alice had, to "forgive him even this," but she wills herself to resist. While Rufus clings to her left hand, pretending to woo her gently yet refusing to let her go, Dana clutches the knife that she had always carried as a potential weapon and convinces herself to stab him. With one hand held by the slavemaster and the other acting out her resistance, Dana returns to the 1970s, leaving behind her left arm. In this moment, claiming her agency as a source of resistance also means sacrificing a part of her body in the nineteenth century. If we recall the image of many hands merging into one, we might

read an added layer of complexity to Butler's metaphor: Dana leaves one hand, literally, in the past as a contribution to the many hands of her fellow slaves. She sacrifices it in the act of killing the master, adding her hand to theirs in what she hopes will be the first step towards resistance for the entire plantation. As an educated woman who hoped to *teach* her fellow slaves, she has finally decided to leave them not only with intellectual resources but with her physical contribution to resistance: the master's death. Her twentieth century body, by contrast, displays the conflict between agency and oppression that haunts her as a black woman in the 1970s. One hand has agency while the other represents the dehumanized field "hand" whose body is seen only as an object and a tool for labor.

Butler's text, then, stresses the importance of embodiment in understanding slave resistance. Only by physically becoming the slave can the twentieth-century onlooker understand the difficulty and complexity of resistance. At the same time, she indicates that any attempt at "becoming" the slave puts the body "on the line," leaving it open to injury and death. Although authors of neo-slave narratives *imagined* the body rather than employing their own bodies in physical labor, these imaginative understandings of the body made a contribution to political theory even if they didn't participate in direct political activism. Gender, sexuality, race, and labor are tied up in bodily appearance and physical action, and black writers foregrounded the interaction of physical factors with social and economic inequalities. By returning to the *slave* narrative, they reminded readers that buying and selling black bodies had been the center of the American economy and the system of American racism. As a result, the body remained the central point of racial conflict even in a society that increasingly viewed itself as post-racist. At

the same time, the obsession of slave narratives with *representing* the body might have reflected anxiety on the part of writers about their own retreat into intellectual and academic projects. The 1970s, with the growth of Black Studies and Ethnic Studies programs, marked an increase in the number of people of color in the academy, and this was a concrete, bodily change. Some neo-slave narrative writers were part of this trend. Sherley Anne Williams, Ishmael Reed, Charles Johnson, and Toni Morrison, for instance, all held academic appointments. But the decline of militant anti-racist activism in the streets and among the masses meant that the physical focus of many black Americans had returned to quotidian labor rather than resistance, and in neo-slave narratives the *resisting* body emerged only in the imaginations of intellectual workers.

### **The Sexual and Gendered Body: Feminists Revise Slave and Worker “Originals”**

While Butler mimics the socialist project by depicting the body as a site of labor and potential collective agency, Reed stresses the relationships between *sexuality*, capitalism, and the body. Reed’s narrator insists that “the South is dandyish, foppish, pimpish; its writers are Scott, Poe, Wilde, Tennyson,” and he argues that we can’t understand the history of slavery without comprehending its obsession with the black body as a product and a sexual object. Reed does not seem as positive as Feeley or even Octavia Butler about the sense of triumph that can come with embracing an oppressed physicality. Instead, his focus on the sexual perversion of racism, embodied in Master Swille’s obsession with necrophilia and pornography depicting slaves being beaten, suggests that contemporary African Americans are stuck in the form of embodiment that originated in slavery. Moreover, by depicting white bodies as sexualized, animalistic, and caricatured objects, Reed argues that both white and black bodies are contaminated by



this history. Unlike Feeley, he leaves little room for solidarity through collective physical labor.

Reed's text overflows with grotesque embodiment. The only real positive force in *Flight to Canada* appears to be non-commercial storytelling, while representations of the body seem irrevocably tied to corruption. It is not only the black body that Reed dooms to this negative embodiment. The slaveholding Swille family, aside from evoking pigs as both animals and policemen, is afflicted with a host of physical problems. A male ancestor was "indescribably deformed," and this deformity appears to condemn the rest of the family to sexual perversion. Arthur Swille III, the slavemaster in this text, inherits his family's obsession with necrophilia and sado-masochism. He receives the "licentious Hedonist Award," drinks slave mother's milk for breakfast, and surrounds himself with monstrous and maimed white bodies. His wife starves herself to death because, as a "suffragette," she refuses to feed herself; his son is decapitated by a crocodile in Africa; the visiting Lincoln looks like the "missing link;" and Swille's dead sister Vivian is the object of his sexual attraction. Moreover, by putting an incestuous necrophiliac relationship that is *not* racialized at the center of Swille's perversion, Reed isolates the white, hegemonic South's "illness," forcing whites to accept this history as theirs alone.

While the bodies of Reed's slave characters may not be grotesque, these figures cannot break out of their status as objects—and as a result they take on the characteristics of branded products. Quickskill, then, outruns agents attempting to repossess him because his lease on himself is "overdue," and he later comments that "he felt like a cheap Sears, Roebuck furnace. A little fire, but not enough to heat the whole house (62, 144)." This bodily objectification also incorporates the layer of abusive sexuality. Stray Leechfield's

first job as an escaped slave, for instance, is to “sell” his body for pornographic photos, and even when Uncle Robin resists Swille’s sexualized desire to drink slave mother’s milk by producing Coffee Mate as a substitute, he unwittingly suggests that the two items are interchangeable. If slave mother’s milk can be replaced with Coffee Mate, then Coffee Mate can also evoke the perverse pleasure of drinking slave mother’s milk. According to this understanding, we consume and take pleasure in the enslaved black body even through contemporary products. The body seems to be inevitably commodified, no matter what the characters do. Even Quaw Quaw Tralaralara, whose acrobatic stunts on the tightrope appear to bring her personal joy, finds herself overrun by fans who visually consume her acrobatic performance.

Reed portrays the body, at least during slavery, as a site of corruption. Only the mind appears capable of retaining some autonomy—and it is constantly threatened by other bodies. Quickskill promises to “write Uncle Robin’s story in such a way that, using a process the old curers used, to lay hands on the story would be lethal to the thief” (11). The “hand,” in this case, appears only as an abusive force that threatens the intellect. Even Swille’s death, which presumably occurs at the rebellious “hand” of a slave, occurs mysteriously, without any apparent physical intervention, leaving little room for the reader to consider physical resistance as a viable solution.

Moreover, Reed’s focus on sexuality and slavery should also turn our attention to the way the body was linked to gender in both neo-slave narrative novels and socialist industrializing projects. Reed himself has often been criticized for his anti-feminist comments and his depictions of women (Mammy Barracuda, for instance, appears as an abusive, aggressive figure while the insipid white female slave owner is described as a

suffragette on strike against all forms of physical exertion), but the neo-slave narrative as a form welcomed feminist interpretations of both history and political resistance. In fact, although I have questioned the way neo-slave narrative authors attempted to import better, more successful slaves into the past, the problems of this process are mitigated by the fact that these more successful slaves were often women, who had been left out of original slave narratives almost completely. The neo-slave narrative and the 1970s turn to industry, then, offered women an opportunity to write themselves into the political mythologies of resistance. In both cases, feminist interventions did not erase or wholeheartedly *reject* previous resistance projects. Instead, they modified them to fit feminist as well as anti-racist and anti-capitalist needs.

The prevalence of feminist neo-slave narratives is well established. Elizabeth Beaulieu argues persuasively that women authors of neo-slave narratives revised the standard tropes of the original, mostly male, slave narratives to address black women's needs. Importantly, however, the feminist neo-slave narrative does not reject the rebellious values that the masculinist Black Power era had espoused in their own histories of slavery. In fact, the feminist tendency to focus on family, which Beaulieu sees as so central, perhaps expresses Black Power and civil rights values of *collective* resistance even more effectively. While most original male slave narratives had focused on individual escape (with some exceptions), Beaulieu notes that the canonical woman's slave narrative—that of Harriet Jacobs—portrays the freedom of one's children as equally important to one's own freedom. Women's neo-slave narratives likewise stress both family and community. Morrison's *Beloved*, in which Sethe attempts to murder her children to prevent them from enslavement, also depicts the efforts of a community, in

the form of Stamp Paid and Ella, to transport and shelter escaped slaves; Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* portrays Dessa's two rebellions as coordinated, collective actions; and *Kindred* indicates that Dana and Kevin aim to change the experience of their fellow slaves rather than simply to save Rufus. Even as Butler recovers value from the Mammy figure and demonstrates the impossibility of purity within a corrupt system, she clings to the hope of collective resistance. And in each of the above examples, women's fractured relationships to their own families shape their desire to act in concert with fellow slaves, whether family members or not.

Although they tended to focus on male-dominated industries, socialist industrializing projects also opened the door for a feminist intervention. During the 1970s and early '80s, both women and men of the IS and the SWP were encouraged to "industrialize," and women's experiences impacted both their organizations and their new workplaces. Like neo-slave narratives, the stories of industrialized women reflect an enhancement and revision of previous leftist strategies rather than a wholesale revision. Dianne Feeley remarks, for instance, that her status as a woman allowed her more latitude to question plant norms. While some male co-workers saw her as a threat to both their jobs and their masculinity, others saw the entrance of women as an opportunity to question some of the most ingrained oppressive conditions in the plant. According to Feeley, black male workers were especially welcoming to the incoming population of women because of their willingness to question health and safety conditions in the plant. Macho disregard for personal safety among rank-and-file male workers had allowed corporate owners to ignore the egregious conditions in their auto plants, but newly hired women saw no reason to put up with these dangerous norms: "the fact that women were

newer to the plant meant that our eyes were more open to the way things were organized. And so I found many men were very happy with our coming onto the plant floor because they felt that we were their allies. And that was very exciting to find those men” (Feeley). As she worked to establish women’s caucuses in the union, Feeley saw her feminist contribution as an *enhancement* rather than simply a challenge to the male-dominated labor movement. Better conditions for women, she stressed, meant better conditions for *everyone*.

While the move into industry was empowering for women like Dianne Feeley and Wendy Thompson, who remained in auto work for many years to come, others felt that industrialization asked women to sacrifice their families for the sake of the political collective. As Debby Pope put it, “We were the vanguard. We were the socialist revolution. No time for reading bedtime stories” (Pope). Both Pope and Elissa Karg recall struggling to sell papers and participate in job actions while pregnant, and both ultimately left industrial work, in part because of family commitments. Kate Stacy, who did not industrialize but who worked full time for *Workers’ Power*, similarly left political work to care for her family. Even in adamantly feminist political organizations, then, women continued to feel that family life was not always compatible with collective struggle. While Butler, Morrison, and Williams depict the co-existence of family and collective struggle, they have the luxury of a variety of fictional characters to take on these responsibilities. Women of the IS and the SWP may have held the same values, but they struggled to live them.

### **Meta-Narratives and Mini-Narratives**

As nearly all of the examples I have cited illustrate, the meta-narratives of liberation that both black writers and socialists shared as a common history were always inadequate to the realities of daily oppression. Nonetheless, these two groups continued to see value in the old narrative structures even as they revised them and modified them to the needs of daily twentieth-century life. When juxtaposed, we can see how neo-slave narratives and socialist projects of industrializing reflected a shift in political form and aesthetics during the 1970s that stressed the *narrative* as a means of bringing increased complexity to political identity and political myth.

In both cases, this shift in form responded to the political failures of Black Power and the student movement, the aesthetic problems of simplified identity politics and teleological narratives, and the personal desires that activists and writers shared for long-term commitments that would foster family life or simply personal stability. During the 1960s and early 1970s, young activists and Black Arts Movement participants had *performed* their politics and their art through dramatic images and rhetoric, whether in the form of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement's spontaneous encirclement of a police car, the Yippies' nomination of "Pigasus" the pig for President in 1968, or Amiri Baraka's traveling theater and music performances in Harlem.<sup>24</sup> And although these activists and writers sought to recruit new members, rarely did they construct rhetoric to reflect the feedback of counter-protesters or even liberal sympathizers. As former SWPer Barry Sheppard recalls, his wife Ethel Krassner responded to hecklers at a protest in the early '60s by threatening to hit them with her picket sign—not by reasoning with them (47). Similarly, the Black Arts Movement was known for its militant denunciations of those

who challenged its philosophies. They often railed against not only whites but “Uncle Toms” and moderate “Negro leaders,” leaving little room for discussion or compromise.

When socialists entered industrial jobs, they embraced a less performative and more interactive form of rhetoric. Within the workplace, activism involved talking with fellow workers, producing and distributing newsletters or newspapers, and building caucuses or resistance groups within the local union. These mundane tasks soon began to overshadow both romantic notions of industrial workers and trepidations about the transition from student, middle-class, or simply non-union jobs into industrial union work. Their publications and discussions allowed socialism to morph into the shape of small political narratives about the working class.

For the IS, *Workers’ Power* was a major tool for writing such mini-narratives, and readers could track the long-range welfare of union locals where IS members worked. One could follow the struggles of CWA Local 1101, for instance, which represented New York telephone employees, through the reports of IS members Ken Morgan, Rose Veviaka, Brian Mackenzie, Bill Hastings, and Clinton McCain. Between 1970 and 1972, *Workers’ Power* detailed Local 1101’s fight to unite workers under CWA’s banner by voting out an established company union known as the Telephone Traffic Union [TTU], striking twice (one lasted seven months), holding officer elections, and conducting contract negotiations (“Lessons of our First Two and a Half Years in New York Telephone”). For non-union readers who were not IS members, the newspaper transformed union struggles into ongoing dramas, complete with personalities of union officials and their challengers. Worker-employer disputes are extraordinarily complex, involving workplace norms, disparate employee populations, specific contract provisions,

and internal union disputes. Consequently, journalistic accounts of labor issues typically rely on broad analyses and reports from management and union spokespeople. The *New York Times*, for instance, which covered the telephone workers' seven-month strike regularly, did not seek rank-and-file opinions. *Workers' Power*, on the other hand, offered both rank-and-file perspectives on the strike and ongoing, detailed analyses of the conflict. In the case of CWA 1101, writers depicted international president Joe Beirne as a bureaucrat unwilling to bend to rank-and-file needs, and a March 1972 article assumed that readers had some familiarity with this "character" in the saga when it sported the title "N.Y. Phone Strike: Beirne Does it Again."

Within the IS, the ongoing articles about locals where ISers had industrialized also generated a sense of collective accomplishment and identification. CWA 1101 was an *IS* local, while rank-and-file caucuses or organizations such as Teamsters for a Democratic Contract (later to evolve into Teamsters for a Democratic Union), the United National Caucus of the UAW, or the New Caucus in the AFT were seen by IS members as *their* organizations. The elevation of local union politics to a national political level allowed IS members to feel ownership over one another's work and to feel that this work, collectively, was influencing the entire working class. If industrializing as an individual was a way of taking on working-class identity, *Workers' Power* stories allowed IS members to feel that the IS was slowly becoming *the working class*. Together, these mini-narratives of local union democracy movements began to take shape and meaning as part of the larger Marxist narrative. For IS members, the Marxist myth was no longer abstract—it resided in this collection of specific and personal stories.



Neo-slave narratives similarly re-wrote the simplified tropes of oppression and triumph that appeared in original slave narratives. With the exception of the more lengthy and avowedly literary slave narratives such as those by Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, most original slave texts fell into a stock pattern of abuse, enlightenment, and freedom that befit their status as abolitionist propaganda. Like black nationalist or socialist texts, slave narratives were typically used as political tracts. They employed the familiar character of the virtuous, long-suffering slave whose quest for freedom prefigures the inevitable fall of slavery, and they do so by using a series of predictable tropes. Writers like Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison and Sherley Anne Williams imitated the socialist strategy of maintaining the mythic structure while filling in the gaps with more specific personal narratives. Ishmael Reed offered a more sweeping critique of the desire to adopt a historical identity or a mythological figure as a political project.<sup>25</sup> His novels adamantly depict only the surface of both “heroes” and villains. Neither Raven Quickskill nor Robin is more than a caricature. But by relying on hyperbolic descriptions and flat characters, Reed highlights the problematic simplicity of the liberation narrative.

He does so in part by satirizing the metaphors of original slave narratives. As Raven Quickskill remarks, “there was much avian imagery in the poetry of slaves. Poetry about dreams and flight. [ . . . ] But it was his writing that got him to Canada. ‘Flight to Canada’ was responsible for getting him to Canada. And so for him, freedom was his writing” (88-89). Quickskill’s tone both dismisses and embraces the basic tropes of the slave narrative. He seems to reject “avian imagery” while presenting the notion of freedom through writing as a novel idea—despite the fact that literacy is a common trope of slave narratives. Moreover, despite Quickskill’s intimation, “Flight to Canada” the

poem and *Flight to Canada* the novel utilize avian imagery with names like Robin, Raven, and Quaw Quaw Tralaralara—an onomatopoeia of a bird's song. Reed's exaggerated application of both birdlike flight and "literacy as freedom" tropes suggests a rejection of such simplistic metaphors.

This reflects both Reed's doubts about leftist politics and his insistence upon the importance of a specific narrative in place of a simple mythology: "anyone who is going around talking about Marxism," he said in an interview, "ought to go out and set up a cooperative and see how it works out. [ . . . ] They'll certainly find out whether they're all scientists or not" (Henry 91). The reality of quotidian life, Reed suggests, is much less predictable than Marxist "science." And although the IS and the SWP did not set up a Marxist "cooperative," their industrialization projects *did* attempt to transform the Marxist narrative into reality.<sup>26</sup> In doing so, cadre members went beyond Reed's postmodern critique by deconstructing their clichéd assumptions of the working class and replacing them with stories of real daily conflicts. Moreover, Reed's *Flight to Canada* betrays his own mixed feelings about replacing the freedom myth with postmodern uncertainty. He clings to the dream of creating and owning an authentic personal narrative, and the original freedom myth guides even his eclectic, satirical text. The socialist industrializing project, then, may have offered a solution to Reed's concerns that he was unwilling to acknowledge.

### **A Strange Comparison?**

By reading a political project in tandem with a literary movement, I have attempted to demonstrate how the political moment of the post-Black Power 1970s and early 1980s prompted certain aesthetic shifts as markers of the changing political climate.

We can see how the return to the narrative novel form, the focus on time travel, a critique of education, and an obsession with the body allowed neo-slave narratives to reinvigorate the old liberation myth in ways that the militant rhetoric of the Black Power movement had failed to do. While Reed's neo-slave narrative simply offers the critique, expressing skepticism about the possibility of depth and meaningful specificity in the midst of a mythic narrative, Butler and socialist industrializers saw more potential. Butler and socialist activists, then, confronted and admitted the validity of the postmodern critique while refusing to see that critique as devastating to myths of progress. For them, *becoming* meant valuing the political importance of identity and liberation myths while without seeing them as rigid and unchangeable. Postmodern hallmarks like repetition and confusion between the past and the present emerged in these political aesthetics, yet the basic meta-narrative remained a driving force. Butler and socialist industrializers simply overlaid this meta-narrative with mini-narratives of progress, failure, and recuperation.

Those influenced by the Black Power movement shaped both their political and their aesthetic landscapes around common structures in the 1970s and early 1980s. While performative strategies had sparked an upsurge of resistance in the 1960s, the 1970s and 1980s marked a shared sense among activists and African-American writers that daily life and personal narratives were the keys to renewing liberating sentiments. Although these writers and activists might not have succeeded in sparking a new era of mass radical sentiment, they did build small social structures to sustain them. Black writers called into question problematic historical accounts of slavery and validated their own histories and narratives as staples of American education. American socialists constructed small but influential and long-lasting movements for union democracy in some of the nation's most

powerful unions. While socialists may have entered their jobs with romantic ideas of the working class, they quickly adapted to the realities. Instead of “uplifting” the downtrodden, they became workers who needed to organize if they hoped to save their own bodies from dangerous machines and unhealthy pollution or to prevent their own jobs from leaving town. They felt the consequences of loss much more often than they felt the exhilaration that accompanied mass protests over war or civil rights. The socialists of the IS and the SWP transformed the Marxist grand narrative into their own lives, and in doing so, they discovered that it was not so much a grand narrative as a series of small narratives composed of victories, defeats, and renewed hope. Like novelists, they came to value the slow process of creating and telling a whole collection of life stories.

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<sup>1</sup> The IS had a companion organization in Britain with the same name. Though the two groups were not formally linked, they maintained good relations. In this text, IS refers to the American IS.

<sup>2</sup> The history of socialist organizations in the United States is dauntingly complex. To understand the detailed backgrounds of different sects, several texts are helpful. Robin Kelley’s *Hammer and Hoe* offers a useful history of the Communist Party in relation to black Americans in the 1930s; Breitman, Le Blanc, and Wald’s *Trotskyism in the United States* and Robert J. Alexander’s *International Trotskyism* provide a history of Trotskyist challengers to the Communist party; and Max Elbaum’s *Revolution in the Air* offers a discussion of Maoist sects in the 1980s.

For the purposes of this chapter, the organizational histories of American Trotskyists are most relevant, as both the IS and the SWP fall into this category. The Communist Party USA was established in the wake of the Russian Revolution as the official American representative of the Communist Third International [Comintern]. When Stalin exiled Trotsky to Siberia in 1928 as an attempt to harness political power, Trotsky’s ideas became forbidden for all members of the Comintern. Several prominent figures in the CPUSA, however, were attracted to Trotsky’s positions and defended him against what they saw as an increasingly corrupt Soviet system. These members, including James P. Cannon and Max Shachtman, were expelled in October 1928 (Fields 131-33). Cannon and Shachtman would go on to become the founders of the two major strains of American Trotskyism.

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At first, the two remained together, founding the Communist League of America, Left Opposition of the Communist Party. This group merged with the American Workers Party in 1934 and took the name Workers Party, and in 1936 the Workers Party in turn dissolved itself into the Socialist Party [SP]. The Workers Party members of the SP, however, were eventually forced out over political differences, and in 1938 this group formed the Socialist Workers Party. In 1940, a minority group of the SWP led by Max Shachtman left to form another incarnation of the Workers Party. From this point onward, “Shachtmanites” distinguished themselves from the SWP’s “Cannonites.” Shachtman’s Workers Party eventually became the Independent Socialist League and later merged with the Socialist Party yet again. In 1967, some of Shachtman’s followers (without Shachtman himself) split with the SP to form the Independent Socialist Clubs of America, which would change its name in 1969 to the International Socialists, the subject of this text. Meanwhile, the SWP remained organizationally intact from 1938 onward, and James P. Cannon continued to act as a leader and theoretical guide until his death in 1974 (Fields).

Ostensibly, the major political factor in the Shachtmanite split with the SWP was the characterization of the USSR. Shachtman saw the Soviet Union as a “bureaucratic collectivist” state whose new bureaucratic class had destroyed the “workers’ state.” As a result, Shachtman and his followers believed, the Soviet Union no longer warranted socialist allegiance. The SWP, on the other hand, continued to support the USSR, conditionally, as a “degenerated workers’ state” (Alexander 795-96). Similar differences re-emerged in the 1960s and ‘70s, when the SWP supported the Cuban revolution, which the IS viewed more critically.

During the 1970s, both groups were at their height, having garnered membership from the dissolving New Left student movements. Today, the SWP remains a relatively small organization that still operates the Pathfinder Press. The IS had a more tortuous history. A “Left Faction” formed in the late ‘70s which argued against the IS’s policy of pressuring students and academics to become workers and disputed the IS’s position on radical developments in Portugal (Finkel, email). In 1977, this group was expelled and went on to form the International Socialist Organization [ISO], which is a prominent socialist organization today (Fisk, *Socialism from Below*; Finkel, email). In 1979, another faction split from the IS over concerns that the group was abandoning its rank-and-file program and capitulating to union bureaucracy. These former members began a rival organization known as Workers Power. The remaining IS had suffered a serious loss of membership, and in 1986 it resolved this problem by “regrouping” with other socialists to form a new organization known as Solidarity. Solidarity united Workers Power, the IS, and a group of former SWP members known as Socialist Unity, and it survives today with several hundred members (Finkel, email).

Each of these organizational splits and recombinations reflects political and personal conflicts that are far too extensive to detail here. See Fields’s *Trotskyism and Maoism* and the array of autobiographies by participants, as well as the texts listed above, for descriptions of such debates.

<sup>3</sup> The organization had just changed its name from the International Socialist Clubs to the International Socialists, and at the new IS’s founding convention in 1969, the group made

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industrialization its primary focus. It identified several industries as targets, privileging those that had the potential to impact the economy and those that already had strong unions. They chose transport (represented by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters [IBT]), steel (United Steelworkers of America [USWA]), telephone (Communications Workers of America [CWA]), public employment (American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees [AFSCME]), and teaching (American Federation of Teachers [AFT]) (Tabor 15). As a part of this shift in organizational identity, the IS also moved its headquarters to what it saw as a center of industrial radicalism: Detroit (J.W.)

With its industrial priorities in mind, the IS planned to send its members into workplaces in small groups. While members would ideally have IS “comrades” to support them in their own workplaces, each industry also relied on a “fraction” to guide workplace activism, and the industrial fractions were united by the larger, national “labor fraction.” Elissa Karg, for instance, who was an auto worker in Detroit, worked with two fellow IS members in her plant, belonged to the auto fraction, and participated in the national labor fraction (Karg). Each of these levels of organizational interaction offered support—and each required time. Activists were expected to devote their work lives as well as much of their leisure time to the success of revolution. Within the workplace, comrades were asked to take on a variety of tasks, including selling the IS’s newspaper, *Workers Power*, talking politics with fellow workers, publishing small in-plant newsletters, and forming or participating in caucuses that pressed for worker militancy and increased union democracy.

<sup>4</sup> The SWP emphasized similar strategies to the IS, but it did so with somewhat more rigidity. Unlike the IS, which included teaching and public employment in its list of priorities (largely because of its understanding that many radicals, whether its own members or potential recruits, already worked in these unions), the SWP limited its focus to heavy industries like steel, mining, and auto. As Party leader Jack Barnes wrote, “secretaries, teachers, and social workers simply do not have the raw power that industrial workers have” (“A New Stage” 145). Moreover, while the IS exerted moral pressure over its members to “industrialize,” inducing even tenure-track college professors like Frank Thompson to quit academia for a job with the Teamsters, the SWP saw industrializing as an imperative (F. Thompson). The leadership ordered members to move across the country to take up particular jobs, and it expected full compliance. As a 1979 National Committee document remarked, “there is no category of comrades with certain kinds of jobs or union situations who should be exempted from our turn to industry” (qtd. in Barnes and Clark 27). And although SWP leaders excoriated the membership for failing to live up to this expectation, large numbers of comrades did enter industry. While Elissa Karg worked with two other ISers in her auto plant, SWP members Paul Le Blanc and Dianne Feeley were joined by approximately fifty comrades in their Metuchen, New Jersey auto work.

<sup>5</sup> One such inspiration was Ed Sadlowski, a reform unionist who ran for United Steelworkers president in 1977. Sadlowski became popular among rank-and-file steelworkers, and although he lost the election to the more conservative Lloyd McBride, his popularity confirmed the socialist belief that union reform could gain mass appeal.

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<sup>6</sup> Farrell Dobbs, SWP member and local Teamster leader, wrote a four-part account of his lifetime in trade union work: *Teamster Rebellion*, *Teamster Power*, *Teamster Politics*, and *Teamster Bureaucracy*.

<sup>7</sup> Kim Moody argues that “deindustrialization” is not an appropriate term to describe the move to “lean production” and a global division of labor that has changed the character of the working class in the last several decades. My project does not aim to argue either in favor of or against the economic process of “deindustrialization.” Moody’s critique of “deindustrialization” did not change the facts on the ground for socialists in industry: plants were closing and jobs were leaving. Whether through “lean production” and division of labor or “deindustrialization,” the process meant that major industrial unions like the UAW had less clout in the American capitalist economy, and the Marxist narrative clouded the ability of many socialists to see this.

<sup>8</sup> This difference between the IS and the SWP was evident in interviews as well. IS members tended to have more positive memories about their relationship to factory work because they felt that they were learning from workers in addition to teaching them. Elissa Karg of the IS, for instance, remembers that “we used to use the term ‘go to school in the working class.’ We always thought we had a lot to learn. We never thought we could lead the working class if we weren’t a part of the working class.” Former SWP members Le Blanc, Feeley, and Pope, by contrast, complained that the SWP took its project too seriously, demanding that members put party recruitment above building relationships with co-workers.

<sup>9</sup> Historian Max Elbaum notes that the same confusion of reality and anachronistic revolutionary narrative afflicted Marxist-Leninist groups at the time. The Revolutionary Union, he says, self-consciously adopted antiquated working-class styles of dress and language reminiscent of the 1930s; rejected unmarried living arrangements as affronts to working-class morals; and sometimes even developed drinking habits in order to “fit in” with the working classes (170-71).

In fact, many socialist organizations had employed similar, if less extreme, approaches throughout the ‘60s and ‘70s. Unlike many radicals in the era of free love and widespread drug use, members of socialist formations were more likely to maintain short hairstyles, dress conservatively, and refrain from drugs as they tried to connect with what they perceived as a conservative working-class lifestyle (Wohlforth 60; Fields 186).

<sup>10</sup> The Progressive Labor [PL] faction within SDS supported a focus on industrial workers, but its minority position never became policy, and the PL was purged from SDS during the notorious 1969 convention that marked the beginning of the organization’s demise.

<sup>11</sup> Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* has some similarities, as it relies on the supernatural, which we might see as a complement to Reed’s non-chronological time and Butler’s time travel. The supernatural embodiment of *Beloved* allows Denver, the child born into freedom, to gain access to the experiences of her mother and siblings in slavery.

<sup>12</sup> The slave narratives of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, among the most famous, resemble the novel form more closely, incorporating extensive character portraits and psychological details. The majority of slave narratives, however, were quite short, often under fifty pages, and they tended to relate only the key moments of the author’s history.

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<sup>13</sup> This is still true today. The U.S. Census Bureau's 2006 study of income revealed stark disparities. The median income in 2006 was \$52,423 for non-Hispanic whites and \$31,969 for blacks (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Smith 5).

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Sondra O'Neale, Joe Weixlmann, and Bernard DeFilippo.

<sup>15</sup> In the late 1960s, student movements and ethnic nationalist movements began advocating for academic departments devoted to African-American studies, Chicano studies, and Native American studies. In 1969, San Francisco State College became the first four-year college to respond by establishing a Black Studies department. It did so only after a nearly five-month-long student strike (Ogbar, *Black Power* 136). Similar protests occurred around the country, and academic departments for ethnic studies soon became common, if perhaps still marginalized, in university systems.

<sup>16</sup> In fact, this etymological understanding of "rule of thumb" is probably incorrect, as the use of the term predated the 18<sup>th</sup>-century British court rulings involving spousal abuse that referenced the size of the husband's thumb.

<sup>17</sup> Reflecting the dramatic difference in organizational sizes, *Workers' Power* depended on the work of five paid staffers in addition to volunteer members, while *The Militant* employed a much larger staff and circulated far more papers (Stacy). Paul Le Blanc puts total sales of *The Militant* in 1973 at 31,000, and in that same year, a party report indicates that average weekly sales from branches alone were 5,893. Circulation apparently increased after this point, as a 1974 report put weekly branch sales at 7,978 (Le Blanc, "Trotskyism in the United States" 45; "Report on the Militant's Circulation in 1973"; "Report on the 1974 Spring Sales Campaign"). *Workers' Power*, on the other hand, sold only in the hundreds, perhaps 500 per issue in the early 1970s, according to David Finkel, one of its former staff writers (Finkel, Interview).

<sup>18</sup> At the time, support for the Iranian revolution was a major focus of the SWP's international politics.

<sup>19</sup> This was certainly not true for *all* SWP workers, as those I interviewed claimed that they attempted to behave differently. My interviewees all eventually left the SWP, whether through expulsion or disillusionment, so their shared negative experiences may impact their perspectives.

<sup>20</sup> Despite the supposedly common belief systems and analyses of comrades within one organization, in reality members exhibited a variety of ideologies and analyses. Former IS member Milton Fisk maintains, for instance, that few comrades believed strongly that revolution was around the corner, and Dianne Feeley of the SWP remarks that she entered an auto plant not because she trusted in the SWP's political analysis but because she was attracted to the notion of a worker-intellectual's role in political change (Fisk; Feeley). Feeley comments that she developed her own understanding of political theory out of her practice as an auto worker, not from SWP doctrine.

<sup>21</sup> Socialists in the IS and the SWP often masked their real identities in organizational publications to protect themselves from government or employer surveillance. Some took pseudonyms, some used initials, and others used their own names. I have replicated these pseudonyms or abbreviated names as they appeared in organizational documents.

<sup>22</sup> This was, of course, complicated by one's ability to *get* a working-class job. Wendy Thompson, a former IS member who worked for 30 years in an auto plant, notes that she



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had to falsify her resume by claiming four years of factory experience in order to get a job. Her actual experience of attending college for four years led potential employers to slate her for supervisory roles, which she wanted to avoid (W. Thompson).

<sup>23</sup> Like many of the socialists who left industrial work, Paul Le Blanc and Elissa Karg left because they had lost their jobs, not because they simply became sick of the work. Le Blanc was laid off when the senior workers from Mahwah entered the Metuchen plant, and Karg was fired after taking part in a wildcat strike in her Detroit plant.

<sup>24</sup> In fact, the student who was the center of the famous Berkeley Free Speech Movement action was a future IS member, Jack Weinberg. He had been arrested for refusing to provide identification to a police officer while sitting at a table on Berkeley's campus for the civil rights organization CORE. In defense of Weinberg, thousands of students surrounded the police car that held him, preventing its movement in an extended standoff that sparked the Free Speech Movement's sit-in at the university's administration building, Sproul Hall.

<sup>25</sup> In contrast to this, Reed does revel in cultural mythologies in other texts. Notably, *Mumbo Jumbo* simultaneously celebrates and mocks Afrocentrism and its adoption of non-Western mythologies. Reed's aesthetic philosophy, he says, is "neo-Hoodooism," an ideology that he identifies as a hybrid of African, European, and Native American cultural forms that developed in black American cultures through cross-cultural mixing. Reed values hybridity and flexible myths, then, over rigid and simplistic mono-cultural mythologies. Marxism, black nationalism, and some forms of Afrocentrism fall into the latter category, Reed believes. As he commented in a 1984 interview with *MELUS*, "I think that the Black Nationalists are mono-cultural. The absorptive capacity of 'Neo Hoodooism' incorporates European ideas as well as Native American ideas. Some of the notions associated with the Black Movement, that eventually come to reflect its philosophy, were merely Western ideas with a Black facade. These ideas were either given blackness or 'blackified'" (Henry 86).

<sup>26</sup> Most Marxists reject the notion of an isolated "cooperative" as a possible expression of Marxist socialism. While a cooperative asks a small group to live collectively within a larger capitalist economic structure, Marxists view socialism as an international project (or at least a national one) in which the means of production belong to the workers.

*Dumpster Diving and Post-Civilization Survival Skills: Anarchism and the New Primitive*

The Black Panthers and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers employed spectacular, bombastic rhetoric. Embracing meta-narratives of black liberation and socialist politics, these organizations favored performative, dramatic actions that aimed to change large-scale community relations. Thus, they patrolled the police, set up free breakfast programs, or attempted to build enormous coalitions of Black Power that extended from the factories to the churches and the streets. In the 1970s and 1980s, black writers and largely white socialist groups dealt with the demise of Black Power by turning to more extended personal narratives, retaining the importance of grand scale ideology while focusing on the details of life in neo-slave narrative novels and working-class settings.<sup>1</sup> These shifts, as previous chapters have demonstrated, mirrored the move from performative poetry and drama in the Black Arts Movement to the narrative structures and academic debates apparent in neo-slave narratives. Today, an eclectic movement of anarchists is attempting to combine these two strategies, the personal narrative and the performative drama, as they recuperate tropes of the primitive and the industrial.<sup>2</sup> Anarchists have adopted these strategies while reviving interest in their 1960s predecessors, including the Black Panthers. Even some former Black Panthers, such as Lorenzo Komboa Ervin, JoNina Abron, Ashanti Alston, and Kuwasi Balagoon, have become prominent voices in the anarchist community, critiquing the mostly white movement for its failure to adequately address race politics while insisting that anarchist anti-authoritarian organizing offers a necessary update to the Panthers' corrupt system of

leadership. As Ervin declared in a position paper for the Black Autonomy Collective, “the Panthers proved how dangerous Black revolutionaries can be to this system, now we will finish the job!” (Ervin, “Anarchism + Black Revolution”).

At the same time that anarchists have revised the rhetorical strategies of social movements, the recent rise in popularity of black speculative fiction [sf], a category that includes science fiction and fantasy,<sup>3</sup> has combined the novel form with some of the Black Arts Movement’s more fantastical, futuristic, and spiritual tendencies. BAM [Black Arts Movement] artists like Baraka and Sun Ra celebrated links to Afrocentric spiritualism and, in Sun Ra’s case, demanded a conceptual move to outer space. Today’s speculative fiction writers have responded by generating African-American fiction that incorporates outer space, black folk traditions, and social critique. This chapter, then, will investigate the rhetorical trends in both black speculative fiction and the contemporary anarchist movement, illustrating how both of these movements exhibit a concern with apocalyptic futures based on environmental destruction. Specifically, I will examine urban “anti-work” strains of anarchism and rural anarcho-primitivism,<sup>4</sup> comparing these trends to three sf novels written by African-American women: Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* and Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring*. I will acknowledge the ways that these anarchists have used the “primitive” to insert environmentalist concerns into the radical tradition. Moreover, I will argue that their celebration of “primitive” metaphors within the “industrial” setting of civilization forces activists to develop concrete skills that benefit radicalism and the community in general. In my analyses of both anarcho-primitivist and urban anti-work activists, I will use the fiction of Octavia Butler and Nalo Hopkinson to illustrate the gaps in anarchist

understandings of “primitive” metaphors. Although Butler and Hopkinson do not directly reference anarchism, their depictions of a collapsing civilization and consequent attempts at “neo-primitive” life address many of the same concerns that motivate anarchists. Like anarchists, Hopkinson and Butler envision an apocalyptic future that will necessitate “neo-primitive” lifestyles. As a result, their novels offer productive commentary on both the social problems of civilization and the consequences of a “neo-primitivist” response.

The first portion of this chapter will explore the tension between uses of the “primitive” in Black Power and anarchist traditions through a reading of Octavia Butler’s novels *The Parable of the Sower* and *The Parable of the Talents*. The Panthers and the League brought nuance and complexity to metaphors of the “primitive.” Activists who belong to the anarcho-primitivist tradition, however, often return to the anthropological definitions of the primitive that prevailed in the 1960s and 1970s. When civilization falls, they believe that non-Western traditions, small communities, and low-tech tools will re-emerge. Butler depicts a similar fall of civilization resulting in “neo-primitive” survival projects, but she inserts the history of race politics into her novel and her primitive metaphors. At the same time, Butler’s reluctance to employ the performative rhetoric of the mass media leaves her unable to move beyond a small-scale utopian community into large-scale activist change. Some anarcho-primitivist bloggers attempt to make this leap by generating a promising combination of performative and narrative rhetoric. Although Butler employs the spectacle of fantasy and space travel in her sf novels, she portrays commodified or proselytizing rhetoric as problematic, and in this sense she stops short of the rhetorical strategies that have fascinated contemporary anarchists.

The second section of the chapter will examine urban anti-work activists. In contrast to anarcho-primitivists, these anarchists accept urban living while incorporating aspects of the “primitive” into their lifestyles. They reject technology and corporate work in favor of scavenging, biking, and do-it-yourself [diy] projects.<sup>5</sup> These individuals have been more successful than their anarcho-primitivist counterparts at tackling racism as a political and rhetorical problem, and their practical do-it-yourself skills help in this process by encouraging them to make community contacts as they attempt to institute change. Squatters in New York City’s Inner City Press, for instance, find that the construction and gardening skills that diy culture values become useful tools for gaining public support and for sustaining the more diverse community of working-class squatters. Similarly, anarchist structures of consensus decision-making and autonomous, small-group action encourage all members of the team to develop a wide range of organizing skills that they can then implement in community groups that may not be anarchist-led. In order to examine the role of diy skills in translating anarchist metaphors into community action, I will include a reading of Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring*. Hopkinson cautions that there is nothing inherently progressive about either “primitive” or “civilized” behaviors or even a combination of the two. Her novel demonstrates that cooperative strategies are the necessary glue for any of these lifestyles while reminding “neo-primitive” enthusiasts that the end of civilization will leave humans with the remnants of the old industrial environment, not a pristine wilderness.

Finally, a return to anarchists of color at the conclusion of the chapter will illustrate how the anarchist movement is already in the midst of confronting its problems with race and representation. Through workshops, caucuses, conferences, and literature

about the problems of race in anarchist culture, anarchist people of color have demanded concrete and rhetorical changes in activist behavior. They have suggested that Earth First! turn its attention to urban as well as wilderness environmentalism, drawn attention to generic depictions of people of color holding spears in anti-civilization literature, and produced ideological tracts that revise black nationalist perspectives for broader multi-ethnic, multi-issue radical movements.

### **Anarchy Rules: American Radicalism and the Rise of Anarchism**

Revolutionary leftist organizations have declined overall in the United States since the 1970s. In a 1970 Gallup poll of college students, 42% believed that “change in America is likely to occur during the next 25 years” through a revolution, and 44% believed that “violence is sometimes justified to bring about change in American society” (“College Study”). By the turn of the millennium these questions no longer even appeared on Gallup’s polls, suggesting a change in popular culture about even the terms of political debate. The labor movement was especially hard hit. While approximately 24% of all wage and salary workers were union members in 1973, that figure had declined to 12.1% by 2007 (Hirsch and Macpherson 352; United States Dept. of Labor). Despite this dramatic loss of union membership and a shift in the public prominence of radicalism, radical activism remains a force. In today’s social movements, anarchism has overtaken socialism as the most prominent revolutionary ideology. Broadly defined, anarchism is the rejection of the state as a governmental structure. Anarchists believe that humans can thrive in the absence of a state by instituting other forms of collective organization. They differ, however, in their understanding of these alternate forms. Nearly all anarchists reject hierarchy and favor economic and social justice. Many,

especially those in the anarcho-syndicalist tradition, espouse ideologies that overlap significantly with socialism. Yet they depart from socialist tenets when they declare that the state is necessarily corrupt and that an anarchist utopia will not produce even a temporary state in order to centralize economic decisions and distribution. Instead, small communes and collectives will organize themselves, perhaps remaining completely autonomous or perhaps joining into larger federations (Guérin).

Contrary to popular belief, then, anarchism is not simply another word for chaos. Anarchist theorist Michael Albert, for instance, creates a model for a highly organized anarchist society in his socio-economic tract *Parecon*. Albert stresses egalitarianism and social justice in his model, and other anarchists exhibit varying degrees of commitment to social or individualist values.<sup>6</sup> While Albert envisions a large-scale anarchist society that functions through mass participation in an array of interlocking democratic committees, other anarchists believe that a world without a state can only survive if humans remain limited to small, autonomous democratic communities.

Anarchism is an old radical tradition, with strong roots in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and it has experienced a global resurgence in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Even in the 1960s and 1970s, the New Left had initiated a shift away from the rigid structures of traditional socialist organizations. Movements like the American Yippies under the guidance of Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin or the French situationists under the influence of Guy Debord offered explicit outlets for anarchist ideology.<sup>7</sup> In the 1970s, many punk rockers espoused anarchist sentiments and adopted do-it-yourself [diy] attitudes about music and clothing.<sup>8</sup> Punk kids became known, as a result, for their simple, easy-to-learn music, homemade clothing, and unusual personal

adornments such as safety pins and spiked collars. The diy attitude made punk style and culture ostensibly accessible to anyone, and it denounced corporate products in favor of personally constructed items.

As a result of punk music and the diy culture, anarchism, which had a long history in the labor movement and in traditions of anti-government terrorism around the world, began to adopt a physical style and a subculture that appealed to disaffected youth.<sup>9</sup> Punk culture served an important social function in the 1980s, when the Reagan and Thatcher administrations in the US and the UK popularized conservative ideas in a broad sector of society, including among many working-class people. Punk allowed young dissenters to express their frustration with mainstream politics and culture while also participating in an exhilarating and supportive youth subculture. Although punk *anarchism* did not become dominant in the social movement scene until the 1990s, the subculture had been growing since the late 1970s.

During the 1980s, social movements as a whole struggled for public legitimacy. With the exception of the punk subculture, most of the movements that survived and grew focused on single issues rather than large-scale ideologies of socialism or anarchism. Nonetheless, these larger perspectives did frequently lurk beneath issue-oriented action groups. As the United States attempted to suppress a socialist revolution in Nicaragua, for example, socialists, peace activists, and some anarchists supported Central American solidarity movements. Similarly, the divestment movement in opposition to South African apartheid offered a space for anti-racist work for black nationalists, socialists, and other former New Left participants. Meanwhile, issues that had taken a back seat in the 1960s claimed center stage. The gay liberation movement of



the 1970s renewed itself in response to the AIDS crisis, and ACT UP became famous for holding “kiss-ins,” “die-ins,” and other militant actions that drew attention to the needs of the gay community. Animal rights activists, in turn, increased their militancy by employing tactics such as vandalism, arson, and theft against scientific and corporate institutions that practiced animal testing. Environmentalism, which had attracted public and governmental attention with the first US Earth Day in 1970, also recruited increasingly militant proponents.

These activist trends confirmed what sociologists had seen as a shift to the “new social movements,” which were characterized by a rejection of traditional Marxism and class-based constituencies in favor of fluid, decentralized, and non-hierarchical organizations that incorporated members’ multiple identities. The new social movements, sociologists observed, made frequent use of symbolic resistance in the cultural sphere (Buechler 45-50). Although they had their root in the 1960s, it was in the 1980s and 1990s that the new social movements became a real haven for anarchist ideology. Environmentalism and animal rights activism welcomed many of these new anarchist activists, and the fall of state Communism between 1989 and 1991 opened the space even further, allowing anarchism’s libertarian alternative to socialism to play a greater role in US activism as a whole (Curran 3).<sup>10</sup>

The 1990s marked a transition from the issue-based activism of the 1980s back to a broader anti-capitalist understanding of resistance. As capitalist entrepreneurs began looting the spoils of fallen Communist nations, the Western world increasingly promoted neoliberal policies through the World Trade Organization [WTO], the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund [IMF].<sup>11</sup> These international organizations earned the ire

of radicals who saw their policies as expressions of Western economic power, and protests against the IMF, World Bank, and WTO grew into enormous performative, playful, and resistant events around the world.<sup>12</sup> Although leftists of all stripes participate in the anti-globalization movement, anarchists have emerged as the key players. In November 1999, a ministerial meeting of the WTO in Seattle showcased the thriving anarchist “affinity groups” as new radical leaders. Organized labor, socialists, and a variety of liberal activists took part in the Seattle marches, but it was the direct actions planned by anarchist affinity groups that succeeded in shutting down the meetings entirely. Many participated in civil disobedience, locking arms across street corners as they were attacked by police in riot gear. Others, including members of the infamous Black Bloc, masked themselves and participated in property destruction, targeting the windows of corporate giants such as Starbucks, Nike, and the Gap (*The Black Bloc Papers* 47-48).<sup>13</sup> Since then, the September 11, 2001 attacks have stunted the rise of the anti-globalization movement, but anarchists remain a visible presence in a variety of venues, from the anti-war movement to radical environmentalism.<sup>14</sup>

This growing anarchist movement is extraordinarily diverse. Although socialists exhibit a similar degree of ideological diversity, they tend to express their conflicts by joining different socialist organizations. Anarchists are much harder to pin down by group affiliation. Many work in small, self-selected, and ever-shifting “affinity groups”<sup>15</sup> established for a specific purpose (i.e., planning an action or undertaking a specific campaign), while others take on the name of a publicly recognized entity such as the “Black Bloc” or “CrimethInc.” when they decide to take part in direct action. Even the Black Bloc and CrimethInc., however, are not organizations in any conventional sense of

the term. They exist largely as names that individuals can adopt for the purposes of a particular event. The Black Bloc, for instance, typically emerges only for the purpose of mass protests. Activists interested in property destruction, police confrontation, or other militant behavior dress in black and coordinate action plans either with acquaintances or over the internet. After the action, which may involve blocking a street, leading a rally on an unapproved route, vandalizing corporate property, or simply participating lawfully in a larger demonstration, Black Bloc members shed this affiliation and return to more mundane activist projects. CrimethInc. similarly declares itself an anarchist collective without formal membership, organization, or even a firm ideological perspective. Anyone may take action or form a local group in the name of CrimethInc., and the national “organization” has no authority to declare such actions valid or invalid.

The instability of anarchist groupings means that individuals often pick and choose among ideological perspectives. One such perspective that has increased in popularity in recent decades is the opposition to work. Anti-work anarchism arose in response to Bob Black’s 1985 manifesto “The Abolition of Work.” Black declares that anarchism and socialism have been plagued by a valuation of working-class labor, and he calls for a revolutionary new culture of play. Black sees the culture of play as a break with modern civilization in favor of pre-modern social forms. Hunter-gatherer societies, he maintains, do not make the distinction between work and play that industrial cultures do. Instead, they see the two as continuous and interchangeable. Hunter-gatherer “work” at hunting, gathering, cooking, or building is not alienating. Instead, it allows time for rest and play, making it simply part of life rather than a structured form of “work.” Black’s anti-work ideology has led directly to a rise in particular behaviors in the activist

community, including squatting, train hopping, dumpster diving, “liberating”/stealing corporate merchandise, and “primitive” living. These strategies allow participants to avoid traditional “work” in favor of full-time activism and “play.” In fact, activities like dumpster diving have become so common in activist communities that they are no longer wholly associated with an anti-work stance.

Among anti-work anarchists, anarcho-primitivists, also known as anti-civilization activists, are the most extreme in their rejection of mainstream life. They believe that, as a result of excessive population growth and environmental destruction, civilization will and should fall in the near future. In its place, they hope to see humanity transformed into small bands of hunter-gatherers. The hunter-gatherer social system, they claim, is healthier for human bodies and minds and more sustainable for the planet. In order to “return” to such societies, population must fall below the global “carrying capacity.” This point has been the subject of much debate, and primitivists have often been accused of racism and misanthropy by fellow leftists when they dismiss the significance of mass global death. In response, anti-civilization writer and activist Derrick Jensen insists that this decrease in population need not result in an *increase* of violence or deprivation. Our global society already generates mass poverty and frequent warfare, so the anti-civilization vision of population reduction may actually reduce current levels of violence, in Jensen’s analysis (129). The collapse of civilization will, Jensen concedes, be a major calamity, but he believes that it will also lead to a more sustainable and just world for humans, animals, and the environment.

Anti-civilization anarchists like Jensen consider environmental concerns equal to or even more pressing than human needs. Consequently, many participate in radical

environmentalist and animal rights organizations. They also tend to identify their belief in “primitive” living as a move that will align humans more closely with animals, and they therefore refer to such lifestyles as “re-wilding” or “going feral.” In their new status as “feral” humans, they will no longer be subjected to the hardship of work.



**Fig. 8. Cartoon reprinted from Chaz Bufe’s *Listen Anarchist!*, which critiques the primitivist perspective**

anti-civilization activists are shortsighted and foolish, giving up even the most useful of human tools in a misguided attempt to return to the Stone Age. Anarcho-syndicalist writer Michael Albert produces a similar analysis when he complains that primitivist anarchism attracts too much attention from the media, overshadowing more sophisticated anarchist work:

Primitivism, usually in the persona of John Zerzan, is given attention by the mainstream as compared to other strands of anarchism whose better substance is literally ignored, precisely in the same way Stalinism’s vile aspects were given attention as compared to other strands of anti-capitalist organization in the past whose better substance was ignored—to discredit everyone with the attributes highlighted. (“Albert Replies to Critics”)

As Figure 7 demonstrates, primitivists are often derided by fellow anarchists for their extreme anti-technology perspective. The cartoon, reprinted from Chaz Bufe’s *Listen Anarchist!*, depicts a man and woman dressed in leopard skins and sitting around a fire. The man holds up a pair of broken eyeglasses, declaring “well, at least that severs our last contact with technology.” The cartoon suggests that

Albert elsewhere acknowledges that this is not wholly the media's fault. "Good" anarchism, as he puts it, fails to articulate a compelling vision of the future, while primitivists excite young activists with their notion of ultimate freedom in the rejection of civilization ("Anarchism?!").<sup>16</sup> Moreover, as an anonymous poster on the Anarchist People of Color website Illvox.com notes:

I think it's critical we learn more about a wide range of ideas, including anarcho-primitivism. [. . .] With imperialism leading the way to oblivion, it is imperative that we find new ideas from which people of color can build. Civilization and modern technology, both imply, present a pleasant, pre-packaged world, cleaned of imperfections and safe. Furthermore, civilization, I argue, is implicitly summed up in most public discourse as being white. ("A Short Missive")

This author reminds Albert and other critics that civilization and imperialism have gone hand in hand. If the binary between the "civilized" and the "primitive" has historically been used to create racist structures, then people of color should not be so quick to dismiss wholesale critiques of civilization.<sup>17</sup> While this author does not ultimately position him or herself as a primitivist, he/she indicates that there might be opportunities for productive race politics in an anarcho-primitivist ideology.

### **A New Primitive and a New Slavery: Anarcho-Primitivism, Race, and Octavia Butler's *Parables***

If Zerzan offers one theory of a post-civilization world for anarcho-primitivists, the recent speculative fiction by black North American writers Nalo Hopkinson and Octavia Butler (Hopkinson is Caribbean-Canadian and Butler is African-American) may provide an alternative.<sup>18</sup> Butler and Hopkinson participate in an upsurge of dystopian science fiction that Tom Moylan dates to the 1980s. As Moylan notes, dystopian writers like Butler, Margaret Atwood, and William Gibson "refunctioned" the genre of dystopia

in the 1980s to critique the current political climate in ways that introduced underlying utopian possibilities (3). It became popular among sf writers from all ethnic backgrounds to pessimistically forecast the inevitability of civilization's demise. Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) depicts the fall of civilization into brutal chaos, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) envisions a global calamity that leaves surviving humans as desperate scavengers and cannibals, and Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998) imagines the civilization of future Toronto decimated by economic catastrophe and white flight. While McCarthy focuses on the individual survival quest of a man and his son, Hopkinson and Butler put value on community frameworks, spiritual traditions, and survival skills that have often been associated with "primitive" cultures. They envision sf futures that require characters to re-acquaint themselves with such "primitive" roots. In doing so, they reflect a sense of impending apocalypse and an accompanying return to "primitive" culture that anarcho-primitivists share. Unlike anarcho-primitivists, they do not see this new "primitive" as an absolute good.

Octavia Butler's series *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) shares the anti-civilization anarchist's vision of the future by illustrating civilization's collapse and a return to "primitive," communal styles of living. Butler's text critiques both the excesses of civilization and the common flaws in utopian alternatives. On the one hand, she offers something to anarcho-primitivist ideology when she asks readers to see American race politics as essential to the creation of a "primitive" post-industrial world. On the other hand, Butler may miss the potential for new political rhetoric that some anarcho-primitivists see in mainstream media outlets. Anarcho-primitivists who circulate their ideas on blogs are often willing to combine the strategies of personal

narrative with the media-friendly performative strategies of social movements like the Black Panthers, and they bring into question whether Butler's critiques of performative action are apt or relevant for the contemporary moment.

Butler's two novels tell the story of Lauren Oya Olamina, an African-American girl who grows to womanhood in the midst of a social crisis. Affected by a drug her mother took while she was in the womb, Lauren is a "sharer," meaning that she feels the physical pain and pleasure of others as though it were her own. She experiences the slow decay of American society during her youth while remaining somewhat protected by her family's walled middle-class neighborhood. At the age of eighteen, however, the drug addicts and rabid scavengers who have become common in this new society invade the neighborhood, killing those inside and looting their homes. Lauren leads a small group of survivors North in search of safety, gathering new travelers as she walks down the California highways that now rarely see automobile traffic. In the process, Lauren becomes the prophet for her own invented religion. Known as Earthseed, Lauren's religion posits that God is change and that humans can only survive by seeking a concrete "heaven" in space colonization. At the conclusion of *Sower*, Lauren establishes a small egalitarian community based on Earthseed in Northern California. In *Parable of the Talents*, however, this brief utopian moment breaks down when government forces invade and enslave its members. Although Lauren and some of her followers finally escape, they remain separated from their children, who are placed in adoptive homes during their imprisonment. After her escape, Lauren continues to pursue space exploration and Earthseed at the expense of finding her missing daughter, and her



increasingly public status as a prophet prevents her from establishing intimate family relationships.

Octavia Butler's dystopian series shares the ideological interests of anarcho-primitivists because it depicts the fall of civilization and the subsequent rise of "neo-primitive" lifestyles. Her dystopia emerges because of civilization's political and environmental mistakes. The events that spark the downward spiral in *Parable of the Sower* comment on the political climate of the 1990s, though they also resonate with the increased urgency of contemporary discussions about global warming.<sup>19</sup> In 2024, when *Sower* begins, weather patterns have shifted because of global warming: a major hurricane has just decimated the Gulf Coast, California struggles with drought, and seaside towns are disappearing due to erosion and rising sea levels. On an economic front, the gap between rich and poor has become so severe that middle-class people can no longer afford the basics of contemporary life. Televisions, cars, vaccines, and even shoes have become prohibitively expensive. As a result, epidemics of curable diseases like measles spread across the country, and towns sell themselves to corporations in return for environmental help and physical protection.

Even before Lauren's middle-class community enters a full crisis, which forces Lauren to adopt a more "primitive" lifestyle, the country has already begun to resemble a post-civilization world. A huge array of stars is visible in the night sky because cities no longer generate as much artificial light, and Lauren's family replaces expensive white and whole wheat flours with homemade acorn flour derived from the fruit of the community's oak trees. Lauren's stepmother Cory summarizes the social situation: "lights, progress, growth, all those things we're too hot and too poor to bother with

anymore” (5). Whereas some of the most famous dystopias such as Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* or George Orwell’s *1984* had presented increasingly sophisticated technology as a threat to human freedom, Butler concurs with anarchists that civilization will become unable to handle its own technology. Weak labor rights and environmental regulations eventually make technology and civilization itself inaccessible for the vast majority of Americans. A social crisis means a *loss* of technology for the masses rather than a new, oppressive technology.

In response to this politically generated dystopia, Butler posits that Americans will be pushed to develop “primitive” survival skills. Lauren decides that she must prepare herself for survival in a crumbling society, so she practices her rifle skills, learns to process animal skins, and reads books on wilderness survival, natural medicine, and the historical plant cultivation of California Native Americans. Lauren stresses that her goal is to “get ready for what is going to happen, get ready to survive it, get ready to make a life afterward” (*Sower* 48).

This statement could have easily come out of the mouth of an anti-civilization activist. Like traditional Marxists, many anarcho-primitivists view the collapse as both desirable and inevitable. They aim both to precipitate it and to prepare for life in its wake. Kevin Tucker writes in the “insurrectionary anarcho primitivist journal” *Species Traitor* that “we know civilization is collapsing. We know that it is only a matter of time before it becomes clear that we’re well past the point of no return” (72). He urges readers to ready themselves by taking martial arts classes, learning to use firearms, and becoming familiar with the electrical grid so that they can sabotage it (79). Tucker’s suggestions, while specific, place him on the more theoretical end of the anarchist spectrum. Many anti-

civilization publications are even more adamant about distributing pragmatic, step-by-step instructions about survival. These documents typically circulate as informal publications, whether in zines<sup>20</sup> or internet documents, and they offer “expertise” from others committed to a diy lifestyle. The anonymous author of *The Ghetto Garden*,<sup>21</sup> for instance, includes directions on how to build your own composting toilet, and the author of *Feral Forager*<sup>22</sup> gives instructions for mushroom-hunting and hide tanning while providing insight on the risks and rewards of eating roadkill. Just as Lauren’s family turns to acorns for sustenance, the Feral Forager remarks that “when I’m eating acorns I feel like I’m awakening some genetic memories, restoring and deepening an ancient relationship that we have with the oak. Native Americans in this country ate about 500 pounds of acorns a year” (5). For some, eating acorns, hunting mushrooms, or rejecting plumbing are a means of “dropping out” and avoiding the contamination of capitalist society. For others, they are a preparation for a future in which they, like Butler’s Lauren, will be better able to deal with disaster.

Although Lauren and anarcho-primitivists share a desire to accumulate survival skills, their differences in rhetoric reflect diverse engagements with the history of primitive and industrial metaphors. Anarcho-primitivists tend to adopt anthropological definitions of the primitive while omitting any analysis of American racial politics. Even as they do so, they unwittingly invoke historical representations of African-Americans. This difficulty in understanding the racial implications of primitive tropes is especially striking because it reflects a breakdown in the transmission of radical rhetoric across organizations, ideologies, and generations. While the Black Panthers and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers re-worked the primitive in the 1960s and 1970s to

incorporate anti-racist and specifically black nationalist sentiment, anarcho-primitivists continue to adopt the term “primitive” and its racialized implications uncritically. They persist in this error despite the fact that former Black Panthers are active in the anarchist community as writers and activists and despite the popularity of the Black Panthers as political inspiration. The online *Zine Library* lists an “Introduction to the Black Panther Party” among its free zines available for download, the anarchist publishing house AK Press has released several Black Panther publications, and groups like CrimethInc. and Earth First! refer to the Panthers as examples of radicals who were oppressed by the state. Although anarchists see themselves as political descendants of the Black Panthers, then, many have failed to incorporate the Black Panther Party’s depictions of racialized primitivism into their own understandings of the “primitive.”

As a result, anarcho-primitivists do not associate the racialized primitive with *blackness*, and they do not comment on or attempt to establish direct relations with the African-American community. Instead, their primitivism mimics the behaviors of contemporary and historical hunter-gatherers, and they usually cite examples from Native American, African, Australian, or Polynesian tribes as evidence. Unlike modernist primitivism, which celebrated the abstract forms of African art and the “soulful” musical expressions of jazz and blues,<sup>23</sup> anarcho-primitivism focuses exclusively on the nomadic lifestyle of tribal peoples. Anarcho-primitivists fail to recognize, however, how the aesthetic and anthropological definitions of the primitive are culturally intertwined.

Moreover, by relying on dated anthropological studies of “primitive” peoples from the 1960s and 1970s, anarcho-primitivists refuse to account for more recent debates within the discipline about hunter-gatherer lifestyles, the very definition of “primitive,”

and the methods of anthropological study. As early as the 1980s, anthropologists such as Thomas Headland and Lawrence Reid suggested that ancient hunter-gatherers did not survive *solely* on the fruits of their hunting and gathering. Instead, they traded with and depended on relationships with peoples from stationary societies that cultivated the land (Headland and Reid). Anarcho-primitivist literature, however, focuses on “traditionalist” anthropological accounts that see hunter-gatherers as an idealized remnant of pre-civilized life. Although they cite a wide array of scholars, they do so to make incredibly general claims, many of which are questioned by contemporary anthropologists. For instance, anarcho-primitivist theorist John Zerzan declares that hunter-gatherers have fewer illnesses, keener eyesight, little social conflict, short “work”-days, near equality among the sexes, and less pain in childbirth (*Future Primitive* 15-41).<sup>24</sup> Most of his conclusions have some basis in anthropological research, but Zerzan does not take into account the details, site-specific conditions, and debates concerning each one.<sup>25</sup>

Zerzan and other anarcho-primitivist writers also ignore the less positive aspects of hunter-gatherer lifestyles. Richard Heinberg, for example, cites anthropologist Richard Lee’s statement that “The !Kung hate fighting, and think anybody who fought would be stupid” without acknowledging Lee’s discussion of the twenty-two homicides that he documented among the !Kung San between 1920 and 1969 (R. Lee 370-96). Jason Godesky similarly declares that “over the course of the millennia, we have gradually recovered from the enormous mortality of the Neolithic, to the point where most First Worlders now enjoy a quality of life just shy of our Mesolithic ancestors.” He bases this claim, however, on a quote from Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel* that places the average life span among pre-agricultural humans at twenty-six (“Thesis #21”).<sup>26</sup>

While they do not rely solely on 1960s and 1970s anthropological texts, the prevalence of scholarship from this era in anarcho-primitivist writings is significant because it indicates how cultural and social contexts affect academic norms. The proliferation of glorified anthropological accounts of hunter-gatherers in the 1960s and 1970s arose in part because of the social fascination with radicalism, anti-colonialism, and building new social and economic forms. We might see the anthropological tradition of studying hunter-gatherers, then, as an extension of 1960s political tropes that celebrated the primitive, the non-Western, and the colonized. In the 1968 collection *Man the Hunter* that has been so central to anarcho-primitivist thought, Claude Lévi-Strauss quietly reflects on the role of anthropology in the political moment of 1968. He comments that the anthology represents a shift in the discipline from the politics of assimilation to a politics that celebrates cultural differences, a point that mimics the shift from civil rights to Black Power (Lee and DeVore 349). Years later, anthropologists Barbara Bender and Brian Morris remark that indigenous resistance in the Vietnam War and the Black Power movement impacted the perspective of anthropological scholarship: “the gatherer-hunter way of life was seen as an alternative, highly adaptive and ecologically sensitive system” (5). While today’s anthropologists usually depict hunter-gatherers as fully modern people whose lifestyle has evolved in response to relationships with agriculturalists, colonizers, and post-colonial capitalists, their academic predecessors responded to Western devaluations of the “primitive” by celebrating the value of hunter-gatherer life.

Anarcho-primitivists have arrived at their ideological perspective, then, through a history that includes anthropology, radical history, and the history of racialized tropes. By

claiming solely an anthropological history, however, they obscure the way primitive tropes are implicated in the history of American racism. Despite the fact that literary scholarship and cultural studies in the 1980s and 1990s have addressed questions of race and representation extensively, anarcho-primitivists have limited themselves to dated anthropological research as they develop their cultural and social understandings.<sup>27</sup> Thus, although they speak out against racism that affects Native Americans, they do so because Native Americans were persecuted for their tribal structures and because Native American communities continue to value tribal lifestyles. They do not recognize the ways that the “primitive” label or the celebratory depictions of people of color wielding spears can be seen as racist rather than simply resistant. As a result, they struggle to understand the *variety* of political needs that contemporary indigenous people have, including economic justice and, in some cases, greater access to the tools of civilization.

Moreover, the anarcho-primitivist interest in biocentrism creates tension with the history of racism and animal representations. While primitivist racism presents the racial “other” as animal-like, signifying danger as well as erotic or social freedom, anarcho-primitivists aim to break down the distinctions between human and animal. This perspective, known as biocentrism, puts life rather than *human* life at the center of ethics (*Barbaric Thoughts* 6). According to biocentrism, life includes both animal and plant life, and humans have an equal right to exist and consume resources as do all other forms of life. They do not have the right to systematically destroy other forms of life or to put the planet at risk. In this system, the environment and its creatures have value in and of themselves, not simply as resources for human use. As a result, anti-civilization rhetoric militantly declares that humans are animals. When they “drop out” of civilization to live

as squatters, foragers, and hunters, then, they refer to the process as “rewilding” or “going feral.” Both of these terms define a post-civilization life not by a lack of technology or a tribal community but by an association with wild animals. The terms “wild” and “feral,” furthermore, suggest ferocious, uncontrollable, and independent animals. They evoke the chaotic reputation of anarchism and the danger of revolution, not regulated egalitarian structures or established tribal communities. While the Black Panthers struggled to reclaim the humanity that Western culture had denied through concrete histories of racism and slavery, anarcho-primitivists embrace an animal identity. In this case, anarchists usefully insert new environmentalist perspectives into activist tropes, but in doing so they sacrifice the modifications that the Black Panthers and the League had made to the “primitive.”

Octavia Butler, on the other hand, demonstrates that a post-apocalyptic vision can incorporate a “neo-primitive” with both ecological and anti-racist elements. Butler cites environmental destruction, privatization, and inadequate labor rights as factors in the culture’s demise. Lauren’s utopian solution includes an environmentalist approach to “sustainable living,” and her collection of followers builds a cooperative community based on low-technology skills in Humboldt County, a region famous for attracting hippie “back-to-the-land” communes (in addition to marijuana growers) beginning in the 1960s. The group does not live a nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle, but it combines small-scale farming and stationary living with basic non-technological living. This approach appears to be Butler’s corrective to the environmental destruction that has brought down civilization, creating pandemics and natural disasters. By envisioning a new attempt at utopia in Humboldt County, Butler positions her future utopians within



the tradition of environmentalists who have also viewed Humboldt County as an ideal space for modeling “sustainable” living.

Butler also emphasizes her characters’ relationship to the history of Afrocentric black nationalism. Although she had viewed her 1979 novel *Kindred* as a critique of black nationalism and a call for inter-generational respect between black nationalists and previous generations of African-Americans (see chapter three), Butler is more positive about black nationalist history in the *Parable* series. For characters in Butler’s twenty-first century,<sup>28</sup> black nationalism represents the radicalism of a previous generation, so in this case inter-generational respect applies to black nationalists as well as slave ancestors. Moreover, Butler’s use of African names for her characters suggests that she sees a specific value in the black nationalist tradition that can fuel future utopian projects. Both Lauren Oya Olamina and her new husband Taylor Franklin Bankole bear names that grew out of this period. Their grandparents and parents, respectively, chose Yoruba names in the 1960s in solidarity with black nationalism. In turn, Lauren and Bankole name their child Larkin Beryl Ife Olamina Bankole, maintaining the two Yoruba names and adding a new one (*Talents* 157). With these details, Butler insists that black nationalism remains not only an important legacy but a continued component of twenty-first century activism. Olamina and Bankole give their daughter a *new* African name, after all, not simply her inherited ones.

Black nationalism remains important, Butler indicates, because the United States of the future continues to struggle with racism. Here, she distinguishes herself from many anarcho-primitivists who believe that civilization’s fall is an ultimate good that will ultimately eliminate problems of racism, sexism, and oppression. Even those who

recognize the problems of racism and oppression during the crash often minimize them. Anarcho-primitivist Ran Prieur, for instance, speaks of a “Sci-Fi Utopia” that will include a war that turns the world against the U.S., an economic crash, race riots, class riots, martial law, and mass deaths in its early stages. Prieur’s utopia concludes with the emergence of autonomous tribes who produce pre-industrial and post-industrial “machinery” such as windmills and bicycles and who interact with the land as well as one another. Imperialism doesn’t die, he notes, but empires come and go rapidly and are more susceptible to dissent. Although Prieur acknowledges the likelihood of race and class riots even in his own utopian imagination, he relegates these events to one sentence. His notion of a post-collapse world incorporates nothing about race and class histories or the ways these new autonomous communities will be able to overcome them. Octavia Butler insists that anarcho-primitivists need to think harder about this transitional process.

In Butler’s vision, neo-primitivism begins to emerge as civilization crumbles, but racism continues to thrive. When individual acts of violence skyrocket due to the influence of drugs and the desperation of those on the bottom rung of the economic spectrum, middle-class people like Lauren’s family retreat into smaller communities that rely on mutual aid and basic skills like hunting small game and cooking with acorns. Although they have a closer connection to nature, spending more time outdoors and regaining the dark night sky, they are unable to trust those outside of the community. A less “civilized” lifestyle has positive elements, then, but it reinforces divisions of race and class and results in increased violence. As a result, Lauren’s step-mother remarks that “the stars are free. [ . . . ] [But] I’d rather have the city lights back myself, the sooner the better” (*Sower* 5).

In fact, the situation becomes so dire in Butler's apocalyptic world that slavery returns to the United States. The terrible economy in California prompts residents to migrate north to Oregon, Washington, and Canada, where they find that state and national borders have been closed to "California trash"(73). Within the state, employers begin enslaving their workforce in a form of wage slavery. After shifting from cash payments into company scrip, employers force workers to live on site while they overcharge them for all the basics of life. When workers inevitably fall into debt, their employers hold them and their children as slaves until the debts are paid. In *Parable of the Talents*, the system morphs from modified indentured servitude to more traditional slavery. Slaves are bought and sold by traders and controlled by means of electric slave collars. Even the government uses slave collars to keep those it "detains" in check.<sup>29</sup>

Butler suggests, then, that capitalist abuses of labor rights evolve slowly into a new system of slavery, and the economic migration North repeats the northward flight of escaped slaves in the nineteenth century. Lauren even refers to her traveling group as a "modern underground railroad" (*Sower* 262). Although these twenty-first century slaves are not defined by race, it is no coincidence that the slaves and former slaves in Lauren's original community are people of color. The first two former slaves the group encounters are Grayson Mora, a black Latino male, and Emery Solis, a woman of Japanese and African-American parentage (258, 261). Later, in *Parable of the Talents*, we find white slaves when the Noyer children arrive in Lauren's Acorn community as former slaves. The new multiracial slavery, however, indicates not the death of racism but the intersection of race and class oppressions. Capitalist civilization, at its breaking point,

forces working class people of all races into poverty, debt, and eventually slavery. Then as now, people of color disproportionately fall into this category.

By tying the labor movement concept of “wage slavery” to the African-American experience with bond slavery, Butler revises anarchist uses of the same term. The “anti-work” strain of anarchism views *all* capitalist employment as “wage slavery.” In this analysis, working for wages is a form of slavery, no matter what labor conditions the worker toils under. In its 2001 book, *Days of War, Nights of Love*, CrimethInc. supplements a section about its anti-work philosophy with a drawing of a person hanging by a noose (Fig. 7). Below the lynched body appears the word “work.” The individual hanging could be male or female, as it appears in silhouette, but the strands of hair hanging about the victim’s face and the light-colored hand in the foreground suggest that the figure is white. The text in this chapter makes no reference to lynching. Instead, it includes personal accounts of CrimethInc. members who have chosen to quit work and survive as they can. In these narratives, the reader learns that the anti-work perspective involves escaping the mundane humiliations of “putting a price on your time or wearing a uniform or having a boss, to deny the capitalist market your labor” (245). The physical discomfort of wearing a uniform equates to the murderous physical torture of lynching.

In other words, the group employs the lynching spectacle to describe capitalism’s quotidian impositions on the body, and among CrimethInc. those bodies are primarily white. Lacking a membership list, CrimethInc. cannot be definitively identified as a “majority white” group, but nearly all CrimethInc. photos and illustrations depict whites, and the group often recruits from the largely white punk music scene. Its anarchist manifestos, moreover, include no analysis of race. When CrimethInc. presents the

lynched figure, then, it does not comment on race politics but instead invokes members' own sense of work as a form of embodied victimization. The work-as-lynching image relies on the experience of racial oppression to define suffering, and it employs the black body solely as a signifier of pain. The real relationships between class, labor, and racism in American society have no place in the drawing.



**Fig. 9. CrimethInc.'s definition of "wage slavery."**

**Credit: CrimethInc., *Days of War, Nights of Love***

While Octavia Butler similarly depicts "wage slavery" as a labor rights issue that affects Americans of all races, she insists that there is a distinction between fair and unfair labor conditions. She also maintains that the lynched body and the slave are not simply metaphors for oppression. As events in African-American history, their appearance in political discourse should include an awareness and discussion of this fact, especially because anarchist uses of the phrase capitalize on the intensity that its

history gives it. The same holds true even for historical uses of the term "wage slave," which was popular among Marxists in the nineteenth century for the same reason that it has attracted anarchists today. Without the racialized form of slavery that existed when Marx adopted the term, however, "wage slave" would not have the same metaphorical force.

Butler, on the other hand, contextualizes “wage slavery” to transform it from a public spectacle into a narrative of oppression, and throughout the rest of her text, she continues to depict her discomfort with spectacle and performative rhetoric as tactics for social movements. While *Parable of the Sower* depicts Lauren’s Earthseed project quite favorably, *Parable of the Talents* presents a more negative account of the supposed utopia. Its decline is linked to Lauren’s attempts to frame her utopian beliefs in a more commercial way. In the beginning, she does so simply by mixing political and religious forms of rhetoric. One of her traveling group, Travis, debates her by asking why she chooses to “personify change by calling it God? Since change is just an idea, why not call it that? Just say change is important.” Lauren responds that “people forget ideas. They’re more likely to remember God—especially when they’re scared or desperate” (*Sower* 198). Lauren employs parables, religious rituals, and promises of “heaven” in outer space to advertise Earthseed in the same way that mainstream religions proselytize. Using her “hyperempathy” to guide her understanding of others’ emotions, she also molds herself into the leader of a personality cult, referred to with reverence by her followers as the “Shaper.” Eventually the obsession with space exploration evolves even further into a kind of colonial dream for Lauren, and when the first spaceship of Earthseed members finally sails, it is named the *Christopher Columbus*, despite Lauren’s misgivings about its imperialist connotations (363). Religious zeal overwhelms the pragmatic focus on building an egalitarian community, and Lauren and her proselytizing Christian conservative brother end as parallels of one another.

In Butler’s assessment, Lauren’s strategies backfire. Her focus on the stars overrides her discomfort with colonialism, and the religion becomes a wealthy

organization, flush with the proceeds from building its own towns and persuading professionals to donate for large sums for space exploration. Instead of living out the dreams of her sustainable community Acorn, Lauren constructs a new civilization, complete with its own corruption. By developing her protagonist in this way, Butler presents slick, corporate style rhetoric and choreographed public performance as problematic strategies for activists like Lauren. Instead, Butler appears to value the small utopia over Lauren's public proselytizing in favor of large-scale space exploration. Her daughter Larkin, lost to an adoptive family during her mother's enslavement by government agents, appears as Butler's voice of reason as she laments her mother's religious obsession. "If my mother had created only Acorn, the refuge for the homeless and the orphaned..." Larkin laments, "If she had created Acorn, but not Earthseed, then I think she would have been a wholly admirable person" (*Talents* 63). Although Butler herself employs fantastical (and commercial, in comparison to traditionally "high" literature) elements of space and time travel in her works, she appears to see fantastical imagery and commercial rhetoric as dangerous tools in the hands of political activists, especially as it relates to large-scale projects.

Some anarcho-primitivists, however, might be able to complicate Butler's perspective. One emerging trend among these activists is the simultaneous production of glossy, corporate-style imagery, and more extended personal narratives. Although their ideologies are different, they mimic some of the strategies that the Black Panthers employed by mixing newspaper stories, stylized dress, violent rhetoric, and provocative images. Moreover, they distinguish themselves from the zine tradition of low-tech, do-it-yourself, intentionally amateurish production by embracing computer technology and

shiny, professional-looking graphics. By combining such images with the personal narrative style of the blog, a form very similar in *content* to the zine, this group of online anarcho-primitivists takes a tongue-in-cheek approach to primitivist cultural signifiers.



**Fig. 10. Penny Scout in homemade “primitive” gear, including fur armbands and a knife belt.**  
Credit: Penny Scout.

The blogs of “Urban Scout,” “Penny Scout,” and “The Fabulous Forager” use these methods to popularize anarcho-primitivism on the web. These twenty-something anarchists share their ideologies and personal lives with blog readers, revealing pictures and videos of themselves and their friends under the guise of pseudonyms that announce their primitivist behavior as the adoption of a dramatic character.<sup>30</sup> Urban and Penny Scout are a couple who currently live in a motor home on the Oregon property of Urban Scout’s parents, and the Fabulous Forager, Giulianna Lamanna, is the spouse of another blogging anarcho-primitivist, Jason Godesky. While all four consider themselves primitivists and “re-wilders” committed to anti-civilization ideology, Urban Scout, Penny



Scout, and Lamanna express their political perspective by playfully imitating the style of commodified radicalism. If Urban Outfitters appropriates leftist politics by selling Che Guevara t-shirts, these primitivist bloggers reverse the process by presenting do-it-yourself primitivist projects *as though* they were corporate products. They blunt the power of corporate commodification by taking it into their own hands, producing their own mock-corporate style so that when their work is appropriated, their original humorous attitude remains.



**Fig. 11. Urban Scout with tipi and Macbook.**  
Credit: Urban Scout

Thus, Julianna Lamanna devotes her blog to the fashion side of “rewilding,” discussing recipes for homemade makeup and instructions for constructing “primitive” jewelry. Her banner displays the title “The Fabulous Forager” with an image of a seductive Polynesian woman in dark lipstick wearing a grass skirt and a strapless bikini top. Lamanna’s blog is a mix of fashion-focused tips from a self-described “prissy primitivist” and feminist discussions about alternative birth control and the problems of

“condescending” primitivist books that attempt to attract women through “reference to cosmos, Manolos, or mani-pedis” (Lamanna). Lamanna draws a fine line between problematic references to fashion like “Manolos” and “mani-pedis” and fashion that can accommodate the demands of feminism. She declares that women can take charge of beauty by transforming it from a corporate product into a diy project. At the same time, Lamanna’s blog does not shy away from imitating corporate fashion and beauty publications. If “primitive” people lived comfortable, “affluent” lives, as Marshall Sahlins had suggested in his famous anthropological essay, Lamanna argues, then reading about anarcho-primitivism can be as fun and light as reading a fashion magazine.

Penny and Urban Scout supplement Lamanna’s text with equally slick photos and video footage on their own blogs. Penny Scout creates stylish clothes, often by processing animal skins, and she frequently models them on her website. A report about a survivalist camp, for example, includes photos of her posed in a model-like stance while wearing short shorts, fur wrist bands, a hip belt for a knife, and mock Ugg boots that she sewed out of felt. Urban Scout generates similar photos, which are often stylized in the manner of corporate promo shots, that depict himself and Penny Scout in humorous poses as hunter-gatherers. In one, titled “Post-Apocalyptic Fantasy,” the two gaze out on the natural world from an overlook point. He wears nothing but shoes and a loincloth, and she is clothed in a simple dress. Another depicts Urban Scout sitting in front of a tipi, wearing a t-shirt that reads “Portland.” A Macbook is open on the grass in front of him, and next to it lies a homemade bow and arrow. Behind him, he has a backpack, a “Rewild” hat advertising his online anarcho-primitivist forum, and a collection of cardboard signs reading “Apocalypse Now” and “The End is Near.” He holds two rocks

in his hand, striking one against the other, and in the background a fence is visible, suggesting that he may be “camping” in a backyard.<sup>31</sup> In these photos, undisturbed nature and primitive clothing appear in the ideal future, but the present retains the marks of civilization: the fence, the Portland t-shirt, and the computer. Even the cardboard signs are designed to resemble homeless pleas for help rather than activist picket signs, allowing Urban Scout to jokingly portray his version of the “primitive” as simply a glorified version of urban homelessness. In all of these images, Penny and Urban Scout brand themselves before they can be branded by corporate America. Penny portrays herself as a model while Urban Scout wears a Rewild baseball cap to advertise his website to those who might be interested in offering him publicity. The pair welcomes this attention as a way to fund their primitivist projects and promote their cause.



**Fig. 12. Penny and Urban Scout.**  
**Credit: Urban Scout**

Urban Scout’s video footage is even more explicit in its imitation of corporate strategies as a guide to better “propaganda.” He advertises his annual “Nuclear Winter Formal” dance, for example, by posting YouTube videos

of “red carpet” interviews. Primitivist Molly Strand carries what appears to be a lead pipe as a microphone and mimics E! Entertainment Network interviews with celebrities on the

red carpet, asking each of the incoming party-goers about their views on fashion and the apocalypse. Strand and the Nuclear Formal guests are intimately familiar with the details of the “red carpet” interview, and they perform the expected banter on cue. Strand introduces each couple to the camera and sums up each interview with a smiling, banal observation as the pair walks away. “Who are you wearing tonight?” she asks one guest, repeating the stock question about celebrity fashion designers. “Squirrel,” the beaming woman replies (“The Radioactive Runway with Molly Strand”). In these mock-mainstream encounters, anarcho-primitivists revel in the contradiction between mass media spectacle and primitivist sentiment. By using blogs, YouTube, and red carpet events, they acknowledge the success of corporate, technological strategies of “selling” ideologies, and they insist that their anti-technological perspective can best be spread through the media that they hope to destroy. When they announce their simultaneous love and disdain for E! Entertainment Network’s brand of consumerism, primitivists produce a critique of the media while guarding themselves against co-optation. Because they produce slick, shiny promotional materials, the mass media has no need to alter the anarcho-primitivist message if it wants to sell it. Urban Scout can therefore have quite a bit of say in his own public representation. As long as his images look professional and corporate, they will appear as he created them.

The corporate and mainstream art world have both taken the bait. In Fall 2007, the website for *GQ* and *Details* magazine published a photo of Penny Scout in a “Trend Report” piece titled “Apocalypse Soon.” Wearing a shift dress and her homemade knife belt, Penny Scout inhabits a decidedly industrial setting as she wanders down railroad tracks. She appears as a capable post-apocalyptic woman walking amidst abandoned

industrial infrastructure—and even in this scenario she has managed to maintain her fashion sense. The caption, meanwhile, benefits both Penny and Urban Scout’s tight finances by advertising her boyfriend’s \$25 rewilding workshops (“Apocalypse Soon”). Urban Scout has also attracted the notice of the local press, including the *Portland Tribune*, *The Oregonian*, and *The Willamette Week*. An LA firm even considered him as a subject for a new reality show. Although he didn’t land this potentially lucrative gig, he did produce an art installation in December 2007 for a Washington, DC event titled “New Future,” where he displayed his handmade stone tools in museum cases, set up his tipi with a TV inside, and demonstrated survival skills for visitors while wearing his Rewild cap, a t-shirt, and homemade buckskin shorts. In this humorous performance, Urban Scout advertises himself while deconstructing museum displays of “primitive” artifacts. Museum artifacts, he suggests, can be TVs or hats with corporate logos as easily as “primitive tools,” and in Urban Scout’s installation they appear with their creator, in their “urban primitive” context rather than in isolation. As a tipi-dweller who often lives in his mother’s driveway, Urban Scout is just as “at home” in the art installation as he is in his “native” habitat. Although it is easy to read Scout as an appropriator of indigenous skills and a romantic primitivist, he also uses these moments to put his white male body on display and to question the museum’s sterile and often decontextualized depictions of indigenous tools and art. Displaying his own imperfect knowledge of survivalist skills while showing off his legs in short shorts, he mocks the serious sense that museums have of themselves as transmitters of knowledge and history.

Urban Scout’s imitation museum display inserts an actual human into the museum setting, generating space for a personal narrative as well as an abstract historical one. By

relying on personal blogs as a companion piece to their corporate-style imagery and video productions, Urban and Penny Scout do the same thing in their own daily rhetoric and imagery. They combine mundane personal narratives of life and activism with their performative strategies. Their focus on continuous personal narratives and their attempt to live out primitivist lifestyles has something in common with the 1970s and 1980s work of labor activists who became workers, while their use of spectacular media-friendly imagery borrows from Black Panther techniques. Penny and Urban Scout acknowledge that their political perspective appears absurd and entertaining to many viewers, and they take their own political contradictions to extremes. Knowing that they will be accused of hypocrisy for living in Portland and using computers while espousing primitivist values, they wholeheartedly accept these contradictions, mocking them and using them as core identifying features. Urban Scout *names* himself according to this contradiction and uses the photo of himself with the tipi and the laptop as his defining photo on his “About” page. They make fun of themselves and commodify themselves before others have a chance to do so. At the same time, their personal narratives, which recount struggles with depression, passionate discussions about civilization’s flaws, and tales of failed attempts at hide tanning or shelter building, portray them as appealing and human—if humorous—to readers. Like popular TV shows such as *The Sopranos* or *The Wire* that portray ethically questionable mafia members, drug dealers, and corrupt cops as ambivalent but likable protagonists, Penny and Urban Scout generate a political following by relying on their personal charm and their media-savvy tactics. Although Octavia Butler’s *Parables* might question Urban and Penny Scout’s non-existent race politics, the two might in turn offer her a more productive vision of spectacular, mass media rhetoric and imagery.

Although Butler favors Lauren's small-scale work of building a sustainable local community, Penny and Urban Scout argue that real political change must be grand-scale. As a result, it must attract broad-based interest, and the camera-friendly "Scouts" are willing to take the risks of corporate corruption for the possible rewards of finding a mass audience.

### **The Ex-Worker and the Urban Scavenger: Problems of Anarchist Micro-Communities**

Urban and Penny Scout, however, are by no means representative in contemporary anarchist culture. Anarcho-primitivists represent an extreme of the anarchist spectrum, and many anarchists would denounce primitivism altogether. Nonetheless, those anarchists critical of anarcho-primitivism do not always avoid primitive metaphors, and their invocations of the primitive collide not only with the realities of urban life and the industrial landscape but also with traditional radical narratives of the working class.<sup>32</sup> Some adopt an anti-work perspective that forces them to live urban "scavenging" or "hunter-gatherer" lifestyles in urban environments, and although they still struggle to deal with the implications of their rhetoric for race politics, some are able to address this problem by branching out from insular, personal attempts at political change to ally themselves with the projects of other local activists, including those led by people of color.

Urban anti-work activists resurrect the 1960s notion of "dropping out" of society, and their interpretation of dropping out often imitates the "primitive" lifestyles of their anarcho-primitivist cohorts. At other times, it clings to a romantic notion about life in an earlier industrial era.<sup>33</sup> Thus, this group of anarchists reflects both the anarchist history of

labor union work and the contemporary urgency of radical environmentalism. Because they often squat or rent cheaply in urban settings and sometimes participate in minor criminal actions, urban anarchists frequently find themselves in the midst of racial political struggles over gentrification, homelessness, or police brutality. The realities of local politics and grass-roots activism force them to question their physical status in minority neighborhoods in addition to their methods of interacting with community members. As a result, urban anarchists cannot delude themselves that the “neo-primitive” lifestyle is entirely unrelated to American myths and realities about race.

Like anarcho-primitivists, urban anarchists sometimes identify either overtly or symbolically with “hunter-gatherers.” They mimic the neo-primitive lifestyle in an urban environment by scavenging from dumpsters, transforming small plots into vegetable gardens, eschewing cars in favor of bikes, and espousing a diy attitude. As urban “nomads,” they may attempt to avoid rent by squatting in abandoned buildings, and when they succeed in this venture they often live without basic utilities, including plumbing, electricity, or heat. They also tend to reject the corporate social structure by celebrating stealing as a means of survival. CrimethInc. epitomizes this lifestyle when it describes the anarchist shoplifter as someone who:

lives by urban hunting and gathering. In this way she is able to live much as her distant ancestors did before the world was subjugated by technology, imperialism, and the irrational demands of the ‘free’ market; and she can find the same challenges and rewards in her work, rewards that are lost to the rest of us today. For her, the world is as dangerous and as exciting as it was to prehistoric humanity; every day she is in new situations, confronting new risks, living by her wits in a constantly changing environment . [ . . . ] To shoplift is to affirm immediate, bodily desires (such as hunger) over abstract ‘ethics’ and other ethereal constructs. (*Days of War, Nights of Love* 240)



This passage indicates how urban anarchists often identify directly with the values of “primitive” living. The author imagines hunter-gatherer behavior as a form of dangerous excitement. She can incorporate exhilaration into her daily routine because shoplifting carries social costs: she may be caught, and each time she escapes safely, she has triumphed over the “system.” In this passage, the author views hunter-gatherers as individuals *outside* society rather than as members of their own cultural communities. The shoplifter faces no social mediation between “bodily desires” and their satisfaction. Instead, she acts in an instinctive animal fashion and is not beholden to the expectations of her community or the desires of others. Here, “primitive” status means denouncing social relationships and acting in a radically individualist fashion. The rebellious attitude of a supposedly “hunter-gatherer” lifestyle is its most attractive element. In fact, it is only by incorporating the urban environment that the “primitive” becomes so thrilling. While hunter-gatherer societies have their own social structures, being a “hunter-gatherer” (i.e., shoplifter) in an urban setting requires breaking social codes and constantly evading detection.

If contemporary urban anarchism feeds off the interaction between civilization and the “primitive,” it also grows out of the American anarcho-syndicalist tradition and its use of specifically *industrial* metaphors. Originally, CrimethInc. had identified itself as “CrimethInc. Workers’ Collective,” playing on the anarcho-syndicalist tradition of labor organization, and in at least one publication CrimethInc. writers identify “dropping out” as a form of “declaring the General Strike on an individual basis” (CrimethInc., *A Revolutionary Vindication* 17). As the group has increasingly adopted an anti-work stance, however, it has modified the name to “CrimethInc. Ex-Workers’ Collective,”

revealing a conflicted set of commitments. When they take on the role of ex-workers, they believe they are beginning a “General Strike” that will spread to the entire community. If all community members refuse to work and resort to stealing, scavenging, and subsistence gardening, the corporate structure will collapse. In this sense, they view “ex-workers” as the vanguard of the labor movement who must attempt to organize current workers to join their ranks. On the flip side, “ex-workers” may reject the importance of labor issues in favor of environmental or animal rights concerns. Because stealing, squatting, and scavenging defy the standard work ethic of the American working class, these actions often alienate anarchists from the connections to organized labor that they might have originally espoused. In this analysis, the term “ex-worker” identifies contemporary anarchists in a historical timeline with anarcho-syndicalists and Marxists. Because individual members are usually too young to be “ex-workers” themselves, they are collectively “ex-workers” in the sense that they believe they have moved beyond the metaphorical and tactical belief that the worker is the center of social change. From this perspective, “ex-worker” is an ideological term identifying the group’s political position as “post-Marxist” or “post-anarcho-syndicalist.”

Even if we interpret the “ex-worker” as a “post-anarcho-syndicalist” position, it is worth noting that the anarcho-syndicalist tradition shared much of CrimethInc.’s ambivalence about the value of working and participating in the industrial world. The most famous American anarcho-syndicalist organization was the Industrial Workers of the World [IWW], which emphasized working-class activism while also celebrating the train-hopping hobo as a key revolutionary figure.<sup>34</sup> Historian Todd DePastino observes that IWW culture “composed a folklore which endowed the hobo with new authority as a

bearer of authentic proletarian consciousness” (347). After popularizing songs like “Hallelujah, I’m a Bum,” the Wobblies earned the dismissive moniker “I Won’t Work” from their more conservative contemporaries.<sup>35</sup> Today’s urban anarchists glorify the Wobbly hobo with such precision that they imagine the culture and dress of early twentieth-century hobos as the ideal expression of vagrancy.<sup>36</sup> Just as the International Socialists had depicted workers in the style of 1930s laborers with soft caps and overalls, today’s anarchists envision IWW-era hoboes hopping trains and remaining free from obligation as they develop relationships with fellow transients.

Some of today’s anarchists consequently make train-hopping their preferred mode of travel, despite the severe decline in railway traffic in recent decades.<sup>37</sup> The autobiographical text *Evasion* (2001), written anonymously and published by CrimethInc., frames itself as the story of a traveling anarchist hobo from the opening sentence: “It was a cruel trick—putting a naïve and aspiring hobo on the wrong train, telling him he was going to Minneapolis and sending him to Missoula. The wrong train, unplanned adventure . . . perfect” (11). Throughout the text, the train and the train yard remain symbolic for the author, though he has trouble with the concrete aspects of train hopping. After waiting for two days in a train yard and finding that the “unspoken alliance between hobo and trainworker” is not so tight as he had hoped (the trainworker tells him to get a job), the author manages to find and temporarily join a group of “authentic” hoboes (169). He is amazed and delighted by “a shocking moment where I looked up, blinked my eyes, and found myself *before a can of Sterno in a circle of tramps under a bridge!*” (171). His early twentieth-century fantasy appears to come true, as he finds that hobo “Big Man was a Deep South hobo storyteller” who can help him

find a train that actually *moves* (171). He even longs for a more authentic working-class identity when he recalls that “the hobo was traditionally a proud migrant worker, trains functioning as a long-range commuter bus” (174). Musing on this recollection, the author suddenly feels that his own anti-work ideology is shameful, and he becomes frustrated with his hobo friends for constantly becoming drunk and strewing their trash anywhere they please (“you shouldn’t litter, guys,” he pleads) (172).

In addition to their obsession with the “primitive,” then, contemporary anarchists fall in line with both anarcho-syndicalist and Marxist predecessors in terms of their interest in working-class or “lumpenproletariat” organization. Most importantly, contemporary anarchists of nearly all stripes have insisted on the centrality of the environment to liberation. Whereas their predecessors had focused on the needs of humans within the global economy, the new anarchist discourse of the primitive and the industrial makes value judgments not only about the *economy* but about the physical structures of the landscape. The identity of the industrial worker, then, seems problematic to this new radical generation because it contributes to the pollution of the environment, whereas the figure of the IWW hobo evokes working-class solidarity in the form of a man who moves in and out of industrial and rural spaces without destroying the environment around him. By continuing to employ primitive and industrial tropes, contemporary anarchists have been able to capitalize on their relationship to radical predecessors and to force more traditional Marxist and liberal organizations to take the environment into account.<sup>38</sup> The industrial world, the new generation of radicals claims, is not simply a neutral territory for economic battles between capitalists and the

proletariat. It is a landscape that represents human abuse of the environment—a landscape that needs to be transformed into a more “primitive” state.

Although the environmental aspects of the primitive and the industrial add an important layer that previous generations of activists had overlooked, many contemporary anarchists have trouble dealing with the *human* implications of the metaphors. The Panthers, the LRBW, the IS, and the SWP manipulated “primitive” and “industrial” tropes to work within already existing oppressed populations. The Panthers and the LRBW, for example, invoked the industrial to call attention to lost jobs and bad working conditions; they also used primitive tropes like the panther and the African chieftain to elicit black solidarity in re-working racist metaphors. The IS and the SWP similarly lived out their industrial metaphors of the idealized factory worker in order to develop relationships and build activist communities within the already existing working class. Many young anarchists, however, employ primitive and industrial tropes primarily to generate their own micro-communities. For anarcho-primitivists, indigenous communities are the most obvious political ally, but the scarcity of such communities and their cultural distance from hunter-gatherer behaviors does not make them a direct target for recruitment. For urban anarchists, an anti-work lifestyle offers little possibility for interacting with the working classes. Instead, these activists identify with “primitive” and “industrial” metaphors as landscapes and as potential identity markers but *not* as points of contact between themselves and targeted community allies.

We can see this focus on the micro-community in an example of an anarchist squat in the Berkeley area. Detailed in a stand-alone zine written by a woman who identifies herself as “Hannah Potassium,”<sup>39</sup> the squat illustrates anarchist uses of the

primitive and the industrial as descriptors of the landscape and of the micro-community's identity but not as tools for relating to external political constituencies. For Hannah Potassium, the squatting experience is a trip into the "primitive" and out again. While the anarcho-primitivist hunter-gatherer learns to commune with the land, urban squatters become more intimate with rotting industrial environments. After moving into an abandoned boat motor and turbine sales office that had been known as "The Power Machine" in its corporate life, Potassium originally lives without electricity, water, or other amenities: "I slept next to a pile of bricks on the hard floor in a poorly ventilated room that smelled like a combination of piss, mold, and partially rotting avocados from Trader Joe's dumpster," Potassium writes (4). As she invites friends and acquires unwanted squatters, Potassium and the others slowly begin to accumulate the amenities of "civilized" life, including water, electricity, a hot plate, and a radio. Potassium identifies it as:

a sort of small-scale industrial revolution. [. . .] We strictly used the power for the hot plate...but then the radio...and finally an overhead light. One was supposed to be the limit. Suddenly we all had lights stretching from the epicenter of power-strip upon power-strip [. . .] I was addicted to progress. It bemused me to picture a time when we huddled around a candle on the floor. Primitive times. Uncivilized times. A time we should never hope for again. I could barely even remember it...four months ago...two months ago...a week ago. (4-5)

Although Potassium had begun squatting to avoid the corrupt workings of capitalist civilization, she finds herself quickly lured by technological "advancement," and she mocks her "addiction" to progress. Living in an abandoned building named "The Power Machine," she is at the center of capitalist civilization, and therefore her intense experience living within and shaping the landscape must be a relationship with civilization rather than with nature. There *is* no nature for her to experience. She can

“dumpster” at Trader Joe’s across the street, walk the streets of Berkeley, or visit friends in their more traditional dwellings, but she cannot subsist from “nature.”

Meanwhile, as the group’s technology grows, its physical and social situation deteriorates. The trash they have been piling up in the corner creates a terrible smell, and group members begin descending into serious social battles that culminate in “wars” about who has the right to use the squat. Potassium and her friend finally booby trap the entrances to the building in an attempt to prevent an unwanted male squatter from entering. The zine, in other words, becomes an allegory for the growth of civilization even as it reflects the real experiences of urban squatters. Her small group of squatters stands in for the entire economic, historical, and social situation of the world at large, and political action becomes internalized to the group. Facing sexual intimidation from a male squatter, Potassium and a female friend attempt to institute a “safe space” for women. Because the squat represents the whole of “civilization” and the “neo-primitive” response, their feminist work takes place within the squat rather than outside its walls.

By focusing their energies on developing what anarchist theorist Hakim Bey refers to as a “temporary autonomous zone,” the members of the squat feel that they have some control over an otherwise oppressive urban environment (Bey).<sup>40</sup> Potassium and her companions are successful in recycling and conquering a space that had previously been circumscribed by capitalism. Potassium admits, however, that their ability to develop a “temporary autonomous zone” is limited by their status as young, white, formerly middle-class kids. She tells us that, although she had occupied the building without permission, the landlord later tacitly agreed to their squatting and told them to “keep the riff-raff out.” Potassium concedes that “most recreational squatters (i.e. not squatting out

of necessity [. . .]) can have pretty good luck doing it. Meanwhile, 50-year-old black men will automatically have trouble. That's just the way this racist country rolls" (21, 9).

Potassium realizes the limitations of squatting as political action, and she acknowledges how white privilege frames her squatting experience. She has *not* in fact successfully removed herself from civilization. Instead, she has access to a "neo-primitive" experience within the city only because of her status within capitalist society. Moreover, as a white youth, her position in the community can contribute to the process of urban gentrification that disturbs minority inner-city communities. By keeping the "riff raff" out, Potassium and other anarchist squatters sometimes become the first white faces in regions that will soon be gentrified.

Most contemporary anarchists, like Potassium, are aware of these contradictions, and they usually seek to remedy them. A central debate rages, for instance, about the role of "lifestyle anarchism" in political movements. Anarcho-primitivists and squatters often earn the dismissive title "lifestyle anarchists" from their cohorts who value organized political work in the community over personal decisions about diet, employment, and housing. In many ways, this debate mimics the antagonism between "cultural nationalists" and "revolutionary nationalists" during the Black Power era.<sup>41</sup> Just as the Black Power factional fight hid the similarities that bound cultural activists and political activists together, it can likewise be difficult to separate "lifestyle anarchism" from action-oriented anarchism. Anarcho-primitivists may be involved in larger-scale environmentalist activism, and urban anarchists often work on anti-racist, labor rights, animal rights, environmentalist, or anti-globalization projects, usually under the purview of issue-based organizations or mutable affinity groups.



These links to community action, however, are not built into the anarchist use of primitive and industrial metaphors. By contrast, the desire to *become* an industrial worker led socialists of the 1970s and 1980s to learn real working-class skills and become part of the blue-collar community. Anarchists' metaphors do, however, give them the impetus to develop skills that combine neo-primitive tropes with the realities of urban life. Although their environmental analysis might be their biggest ideological contribution to the larger world of activism, anarchist diy skills are their most pragmatic contribution when they choose to branch out from their micro-communities into other forms of activist work. Urban anarchists find that these skills are not so much "primitive" skills as radical organizing skills that can be employed by grassroots organizations with few financial resources.

### **Skill Shares and Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring***

Nalo Hopkinson's recent science fiction/horror novel *Brown Girl in the Ring* illustrates the potential that anarchists have to combine diy skills with urban politics. The diy perspective is not necessarily linked to neo-primitivism. In the 1970s, punk bands espoused diy notions when they recorded and released their own records without the aid of major record companies. For them, diy was not a statement about technology but an act of resistance to the corporate control of music. Today, diy combines the punk tradition of diy with new anarcho-primitivist implications. Some anarchists practice diy because they want to protest corporate culture while others laud it as a way of favoring simple technologies over more complex ones. Hopkinson demonstrates that, whether linked to notions of the "primitive" or not, diy traditions have the potential to launch participants into positive interactions with larger communities. Like Butler, Hopkinson

employs fantastical, spectacular genres such as horror and science fiction that used to fall outside the category of “serious” literature, and she combines these with political analyses of race and contemporary culture. In doing so, she reflects the histories of both performative Black Arts work that celebrated “low art” and post-Black Arts novels that returned to more academic “high art.” Her depiction of an urban Toronto collapsing into a “neo-primitive” city, moreover, stresses the impossibility of recreating a truly “primitive” environment. Any “primitive” lifestyles must be filtered through the lens of industry, modernity, and post-modernity.

As a writer who has lived in Jamaica, Trinidad, Guyana, and Canada, Hopkinson incorporates Caribbean Obeah traditions into her sf horror novel *Brown Girl in the Ring* (Hopkinson and Nelson 97). Hopkinson’s protagonist Ti-Jeanne<sup>42</sup> lives in a post-civilization Toronto. Although the rest of the world presumably maintains its links to technological capitalist civilization, the urban center has become the hole of an economic “doughnut.” After the Temagami Indians file suit against the Ontario government over indigenous land rights, the city falls into economic crisis. Eventually, the government and its wealthy citizens (mostly white) abandon the city altogether, leaving the impoverished barricaded inside Toronto without electricity, plumbing, or public transportation. As a result, Toronto’s inhabitants turn to subsistence farming, hunting small game such as squirrels, pigeons, dogs, and cats. Ti-Jeanne’s grandmother Gros Jeanne is the local healer, practicing with a nursing degree and an understanding of Caribbean folk medicine, and a posse of drug dealers headed by Gros Jeanne’s ex-husband Rudy rules over the newly “primitive” society.

Hopkinson's crash begins with an act of resistance when indigenous people assert their land rights. It is not the white community that suffers, however. Instead, the Temagami victory creates a technological and economic crisis for other communities of color. Hopkinson never mentions the status of the Temagami again, and we never know whether they have achieved a utopian or at least a just existence in return for Toronto's collapse. Instead, we see how ethnic communities become isolated from one another as the hegemonic system employs the "divide and conquer" method to drive them apart. The movement for indigenous rights is distinct from other anti-racist or economic justice projects, and the victory of one movement does not result in a positive domino effect for others.

The "fall," then, appears in Hopkinson's text as an undesirable event that targets people of color, leaving them *forced* to turn to "primitive" means of survival. At the same time, the crisis appears to slightly increase community and ethnic cooperation. For Caribbean Canadians, it offers some measure of cultural freedom: "Among Caribbean people," Ti-Jeanne thinks, "bush medicine used to be something private, but living in the Burn changed all the rules" (14). Now, folk medicine and Western medicine come together in response to the lack of Western pharmaceuticals, an example of privation that opens the culture to Caribbean traditions. In addition to cultural changes, the entire community begins to adopt habits that anarchists would celebrate as egalitarian and diy. The major Toronto newspapers are replaced by a hand-made zine, which has the privilege of announcing major news about the Temagami lawsuit victory and the end to army occupation of Toronto; a street vendor sells reconditioned bicycles to replace car traffic; and a woman at the market performs shoe repair with discarded rubber. The local market

involves bartering as well as sale, encouraging many people to develop skills that will be useful to the community. With these details, Hopkinson portrays a neo-primitivist lifestyle as ambiguously positive. Unlike anarchists, however, the residents of Toronto did not seek out this major economic shift, and many, including the protagonist Ti-Jeanne, want to escape to the suburbs where they could return to industrial capitalist civilization.

Hopkinson's protagonist becomes more positive about post-civilization Toronto, however, when she hones skills that will be useful for both the family and the community, and this presents a parallel to the anarchist diy attitude. While we can certainly see the critique of race that Hopkinson, like Butler, brings to the anti-civilization perspective, her focus on Ti-Jeanne's skill development highlights one of the ways that anarchists can productively move outside their own micro-communities and interact with the larger culture. Initially, Ti-Jeanne appears as a reluctant teenage mother of a little boy who has yet to be named. She refers to him as "Bolom," meaning "fetus," and she quickly becomes irritated when he demands her attention with his cries. Her grandmother, on the other hand, who has been an exacting and sometimes harsh parental figure for Ti-Jeanne, is also adamant about using her medical, spiritual, and simply human skills to nurture both her family and her community. Her demeanor and relationship to Caribbean spirituality, for instance, frighten a group of orphans who ask her to set a broken leg, but Gros Jeanne fixes the leg and welcomes the hungry troupe into her home. Ti-Jeanne has much less patience. She flinches at the orphan children's filthiness, shakes Baby and tells him to "shut up" when he cries, and chafes at Gros

Jeanne's insistence that she should develop her skills in both Western medicine and Caribbean folk medicine.

Throughout the text, Ti-Jeanne transforms from a pouty teenager into a capable seer woman whose ability to call the spirits helps her defeat posse leader and fellow Obeah practitioner Rudy. Rudy has used Obeah to break his family relationships, transforming his daughter Mi-Jeanne into a spiritual slave or duppy<sup>43</sup> and demanding that one of his minions kill both Gros Jeanne and Ti-Jeanne to satisfy the demands of the Canadian prime minister for a human heart. Ti-Jeanne, by contrast, develops her spiritual skills in concert with her grandmother, her baby boy, her newly rediscovered mother Mi-Jeanne, and the group of children whom her grandmother healed. Transformed into Rudy's duppy, Mi-Jeanne's soulless body wandered the streets as the homeless woman "Crazy Betty" before she managed to return to Gros Jeanne's home to warn her mother and daughter of Rudy's plot. When Ti-Jeanne matches her Obeah skills against Rudy's, she succeeds because she has connections with others in the community. The children find her an escape path, and she mitigates the effects of Rudy's duppy bowl by appealing to Mi-Jeanne's latent motherly love. Although the duppy Mi-Jeanne *must* obey Rudy's order to kill Ti-Jeanne, Ti-Jeanne asks her duppy mother to postpone carrying out the order, thus giving herself time to react.

Hopkinson makes a distinction, then, between Obeah as a form of manipulation and a form of healing. Traditional Caribbean skills are not necessarily positive connections to ethnic identity or a time before Western medicine. Nor does the destruction of Caribbean/Canadian or traditional/Western binaries necessarily produce productive results. Rudy, after all, uses Obeah to support the drug trade and his plush

Western lifestyle in the midst of Toronto's destruction. Instead, Hopkinson suggests that diy skills and the mixture of Western and traditional lessons occur most productively in concert with community organizing. The "Burn" is at its best when residents pool their "neo-primitive" skills at the regular market or when Ti-Jeanne seeks help from her family members or the group of children whom her grandmother had given medical care. Even if Hopkinson does not depict diy skills as the *key* to community cooperation, they certainly appear to help. When Ti-Jeanne finally becomes a healer and a seer woman like her grandmother, she has reason to connect with those outside her immediate family, offering her skills and building relationships that lead her to feel that burned-out Toronto is a genuine home.

We can see the same form of skill-building as a link to a broader community in Moe Bowstern's zine *Xtra Tuf*. Although Bowstern does not identify herself specifically as an anti-work anarchist, she does participate in the urban anarchist community, living outside of the standard capitalist structure for much of the year. As a participant in an anarchist infoshop and a member of a collective living situation, Bowstern joins fellow anarchists in attempting to survive with "only the barest of expenses" (38).<sup>44</sup> During the summers, however, she earns money by working as a deckhand for the Alaska fishing industry. Her experience as a "fisherman" (Bowstern accepts the term for herself in addition to fisher woman or simply fisher) satisfies romantic notions of both the "primitive" and the "industrial," although Bowstern herself is quite realistic about the relation of these metaphors to real life. She enjoys the connection to nature that fishing offers, reveling in life "free of phones, cares, money and all the complications of modern urban living," and after several years working on a boat, she transfers to the land to

become a beach seiner, “the oldest form of fishing” (6, 25).<sup>45</sup> She experiences the highly industrial world of commercial fishing, then, as a means of traveling back in time, to more “primitive” relations with the sea and technology. At the same time, she is excited to be part of a working-class, industrial world that is different from her urban anarchist community. *Xtra Tuf* #5 exhibits these feelings by relating Bowstern’s experiences in several commercial fishing strikes led by Kodiak’s United Seiners Association [USA].

For Bowstern, the *simultaneous* attraction of the “primitive” and the “industrial”—rather than simply a focus on the “primitive”—leads her to branch outside of her anarchist micro-community, and she finds that her anarchist diy skills become particularly useful in the strike situation. These are not strictly neo-primitivist skills such as hunting, gathering mushrooms, or tanning animal hides. Instead, her talents are based on the urban anarchist’s diy basics, which eschew major technology and meets activist needs. Eager to avoid participating in the capitalist economy, diy adherents learn to print their own t-shirts, create patches displaying band names or activist slogans, and generate banners or flyers using inexpensive or free resources. The prevalence of these skills among anarchists indicates the overlap between anti-capitalist perspectives, a desire to separate oneself from technology, the needs of activist work, and the exigencies of life with few financial resources.

Moe Bowstern discovers that her diy skills, whether gained because of anti-technology sentiments or activist pragmatism, are valuable to her fellow strikers. As the group decides to strike, Bowstern insists that they must have a slogan and a logo, and she designs and reproduces both using her diy talents:

I volunteered tactics I had learned at the anarchist infoshop I helped organize in Chicago. After Gunter cut a stencil of our logo, I spent a sunny afternoon

transferring it onto 150 plastic skate bottoms with black spray paint in the company of a couple of handsome shiftless 20-something deckhands [. . .] I got recognition and appreciation for my ideas from the fishermen, who normally don't even bother to acknowledge deckhands who don't work for them. (37-41)

Bowstern parallels Hopkinson's Ti-Jeanne when she translates basic skills into tools for group solidarity. Like her activist predecessors in the Black Panthers or the IS, Bowstern's idealistic notions of both the primitive and the industrial become more complicated when she inserts herself into real political struggles. Although she strongly supports the strikers, she tries to understand her surroundings as fully as she can, and she therefore even makes room in her zine for the voices of "scabs" who chose to fish during the strike.

Bowstern is not alone among anarchists in contextualizing and complicating her use of primitive and industrial tropes. Aware that activist squatting can be a trigger for gentrification, many participate in anti-gentrification projects or homeless advocacy groups. In New York City, for example, a long history of squatting and "homesteading" has linked anarchists to local community members and the homeless.<sup>46</sup> In 1987, a local activist started the Inner City Press, a group that organizes and defends squats for willing participants. Since then, it has occupied many buildings, establishing and attempting to renovate housing for both anarchist activists and local working-class citizens (Bearak). After numerous showdowns with police over eviction orders, Inner City Press and several other groups of New York City squatters earned the right to stay in 2002 on the condition that they bring the buildings up to code (Ferguson). Squatting projects like this in New York and other cities force anarchist squatters to immerse themselves in local politics of race, poverty, and housing while also developing their diy skills. Residents in the squats learn to pirate electricity, replace plumbing, and set up alternative heating systems. They



also frequently set up community gardens for vegetables and fruits, developing rudimentary “farming” skills to benefit poor urban communities (Ferguson).

In these squatting scenarios, anarchist diy abilities are essential both for survival and for gaining community support. Homesteading has substantial public support in New York City because of its association with hard work and personal improvement, whereas the notion of living “rent free” does not. As City Councilmember Margarita Lopez commented to *The Village Voice* when the squatters’ settlements were finally approved as homesteads:

Before, the majority of the people were single white individuals who came from outside the neighborhood. It was easy to identify them; they had Mohawks or whatever you call those things. They were in total rebellion with everybody and everything. They were a movement against the rental buildings, because the people believed everything should be free and that nobody should ever pay. (Ferguson)

*Village Voice* reporter Ferguson goes on to remark that “In fact, quite a few of the folks living in these buildings were once young punks and wild-eyed idealists. But for every radical in the streets, there were always many more who shunned the spotlight, quietly working to carve out homes inside their rubble-strewn buildings.” Both Ferguson and Lopez contrast punk anarchists with the “hard-working” squatters who are worthy of homestead rights, though Ferguson notes that many of the hard workers were *once* “young punks and wild-eyed idealists.” She indicates that the willingness to work, contributing diy skills to squatting rather than simply defying standard property rights, transforms activists from outsiders into part of the community. Anarchist squatter Rick Van Savage confirms that diy skills can help build this kind of positive anarchist-community relationship. He maintains that anarchists have to convince locals “that you aren’t just there as a crash-pad. [. . .] If you have been there for a number of years, and

you are really trying to incorporate people from the neighborhood into your squat, and you are not just a bunch of white suburban kids coming in for the summer, they will be much more sympathetic” (Van Savage). In New York’s squats, this non-anarchist community includes many Latino/a and African-American residents. Even in C-Squat, the city’s most famous punk anarchist haven, Ferguson notes that half the squatters are people of color. Consequently, developing community skills that foster relationships between anarchists and fellow squatters means confronting the reasons that anarchism is a majority-white movement and attempting to correct or at least assuage these problems.

In such cases, diy skills are translated into “survival skills” that are applicable in twenty-first century urban life. Instead of glorifying urban “hunting and gathering,” squatters like those in Inner City Press become involved in local race politics and issues of economic justice. They suggest that any alternative or “neo-primitive” lifestyles we create will necessarily be filtered through the infrastructure of industry and technology. There is no way to return to the past but only to construct a future that employs that “re-purposes” civilization’s tools. For anarchists, remnants of civilization become “artifacts” (members of Urban Scout’s *Rewild.info* forum actually use this term to refer to civilization’s items), and in this new world, artifacts of the past will be used rather than simply displayed or studied. Nalo Hopkinson also emphasizes this point when she houses her protagonists in a structure that used to be a museum artifact. Gros Jeanne and Ti-Jeanne live in a mock nineteenth-century farmhouse that, in “civilized” Toronto, once served as a museum. There, children and families could watch actors take on the roles of farmers, milking cows and collecting eggs from the henhouse: “The Simpson House wasn’t a real house at all, just a façade that the Parks Department had built to resemble

the original farmhouse” (34). In industrialized Toronto, the nineteenth-century farm was a source of entertainment. In “the Burn,” however, the farmhouse takes on its formerly fictional roles. Ti-Jeanne and Gros Jeanne inhabit the rooms, cook on a wood stove, and dig their own outhouse to replace the public men’s and women’s bathrooms that the Parks Department had installed. In one sense, this use of the farmhouse indicates a shift to an earlier era when nineteenth-century technologies were necessary. In another sense, the display house is just one more remnant of civilization that can be “re-purposed” for post-apocalyptic use.

### **Conclusion: Taking Out the Dams**

This ability to incorporate *both* industrial and primitive landscapes allows anarchists and science fiction writers like Nalo Hopkinson and Octavia Butler to combine stark dystopia with the promise of a socially just future. White writer Cormac McCarthy demonstrates the dystopian consequences of refusing this combination a novel that mirrors the post-civilization chaos of Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*. McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) portrays a world in which an undefined cataclysm has left the globe covered in ashes and barren of nearly all animal and plant life. Industrial structures and a small number of humans remain. In a conversation between the two main characters, a child asks his father about the relationship between industrial structures and life forms:

Will the dam be there for a long time?  
I think so. It’s made of concrete. It will probably be here for hundreds of  
years. Thousands, even.  
Do you think there are fish in the lake?  
No there’s nothing in the lake. (17)

McCarthy’s novel indicates that the industrial environment cannot coexist with a reviving “primitive” environment. The dam will remain, but the fish will not recover.

Anarchists, in concert with Hopkinson and Butler, maintain a different perspective. And for anarchists, the dam is a particularly poignant symbol. Dams are environmentalist shorthand for harmful industrial structures, as they flood animal and human habitats and destroy rivers that fish like salmon need in order to spawn. Edward Abbey's famous novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* revolves around a plot to bomb the Glen Canyon dam, and anti-civilization activist Derrick Jensen employs the dam as the primary symbol of civilization. Jensen uses the phrase "taking out dams" as a metaphor for resistance to civilization (306). By referencing a dam as an example of the surviving infrastructure, then, McCarthy offers an extremely pessimistic view of the environment's future. Anarchists, by contrast, do not see the dam as a permanent structure that will outlive the fish. Abbey's monkeywrenchers and Jensen's saboteurs are lurking in the background, ready to destroy the dams and renew the environmental equilibrium. The environment and "primitive" human lifestyles will survive, living in, on, and around the ruins of industry.

This, of course, is the most optimistic anarchist vision of a post-civilization world. Hopkinson and Butler allow for some level of optimism about blending primitive and industrial landscapes while offering perspectives that could help anarchists further complicate and contextualize their metaphors. These sf authors engage anarchist ideologies when they incorporate examples of wage slavery, survival skills, primitivist racism, and egalitarian communities into their work. They are more negative than anarcho-primitivists about the experience of civilization's collapse, however, depicting it as a catastrophe that *forces* humans unwillingly into adopting neo-primitive skills. This representation is useful because it foregrounds the moment of the fall, stressing that the

process of destroying civilization will be a costly one, especially for people of color. By incorporating analyses of race, both authors insist that anti-civilization anarchists fail to understand the impact of racialized language on real politics.

Contemporary anarchists—even those of the anarcho-primitivist or anti-civilization variety—also have something to offer their literary cohorts. Although they may invoke the primitive in racially problematic ways, they do succeed in transforming the primitive and the industrial from signs of the impending apocalypse into tropes of change and human agency. For urban anarchists, abandoned industrial spaces become recycled homes and dumpster diving becomes a metaphorical means of gathering nuts and berries. This is no different from the lives of the characters in Hopkinson's or Butler's science fiction. However, for urban anarchists, these behaviors are chosen as part of a larger ideological perspective and a long-range plan. They reflect the combination of modern spaces, post-modern experiences, and "primitive" skills that Hopkinson portrays as positive and perhaps necessary. As a result, many urban anarchists manage to tackle the prospects of environmental destruction and economic crash with a sense of cautious optimism. Their willingness to integrate the urban structure into neo-primitive skills, moreover, suggests an understanding of these tropes as tactics rather than absolute descriptors of anthropological or social identity. While anarcho-primitivists tend to isolate themselves in their search for an authentic "primitive" experience, urban anarchists, even those who share some of the same sentiments, often use their survival skills to branch out into community groups and varied social justice projects.

Nonetheless, urban anarchists who reject work highlight their privileged status in society. Those who *choose* to be homeless, unemployed scavengers have the ability to

move in and out of such a status, whereas the characters in Butler's and Hopkinson's stories are relegated to scarcity and physical hardship by social and economic status. Many who adopt the anti-work stance as young people in their teens and twenties ultimately find it hard to maintain this lifestyle as they age. Dumpstering, stealing, and squatting can be physically tiring and emotionally draining, and adults who no longer look like middle-class college students have a much more difficult time evading law enforcement. For aging anarchists, a transition into alternate forms of activist work may be necessary or desirable, and this shift will be easiest for those who see urban primitive lifestyles as tactical and metaphorical rather than essential to one's identity.

Contemporary anarchists have struggled with understanding their relationship to the "primitive." They have discovered that the metaphors of the primitive and the industrial, so evocative in their depictions of past, present, and future, continue to have resonance for potential recruits. With the exigencies of today's environmental crisis, these tropes also acquire a new impact. If "industry" and "civilization" describe the concrete environmental condition of our globe, can't the "primitive" be equally concrete as a space for environmental and social recovery? Anarcho-primitivists adamantly answer "yes," although they have trouble dealing with the realities of a not-yet-fallen "civilization" as they make personal transitions into "wildness." Urban anarchists tend to have more misgivings, some rejecting notions of the "primitive" altogether even as they embrace acts like diy culture, urban scavenging, and squatting that link them metaphorically to anarcho-primitivist projects. In both cases, these metaphors position anarchists within a radical history and a literary conversation. Having introduced environmentalist definitions of the "primitive" and the "industrial" to the radical

understanding, they must also incorporate the racial and social analyses of these tropes that science fiction writers and activist predecessors place at center stage.

This process has already begun among people of color in the anarchist community, who held the first Anarchist People of Color Conference in Detroit in 2003. The following year, participants published a two-volume collection based on the conference titled *Our Culture, Our Resistance* and established a website of written materials known as *Illegal Voices*. The essays that appear in the books and the website, in addition to a growing number of other zines and websites, address the problems of racism and race politics among contemporary anarchists. Many of these writers claim that they came to anarchism because of its anti-hierarchical structures and its tradition of direct action. Former Panther Ashanti Alston, for instance, sees anarchism as both a corrective to the Black Panther Party's hierarchical structure and a *fulfillment* of its core values. He recalls a BPP call-and-response chant in which the leader shouted "Power to the People!" and the crowd responded "ALL Power to the People!" (Alston). After absorbing anarchist literature in prison, Alston begins to feel that the Panthers gave too much power to the leadership. Only anarchism, he believed, offered *all* power to the people as the Panther chant had promised. Other young anarchists of color are attracted to the movement not only for its anti-hierarchical perspective but also to traditions of anarchist militancy that stress a willingness to take physical risks, especially in confrontations with the police. This interest in aggressive tactics, too, resembles the behavior of daring Panther predecessors. As African-American anarchist Greg Lewis puts it in *Our Culture, Our Resistance*, "the anarchists did things. They took over buildings and lived in them, they chased the Nazis off the streets, they would go to community meetings and blast the so-

called ‘experts’ on homelessness or youth issues, and they would share whatever they had with you without asking for anything in return” (77).

Anarchists of color begin to criticize their peers, however, when white anarchists fail to understand race as a problem worthy of such direct action tactics. Victoria Law, a Chinese-American activist, recalls being criticized by fellow activists for sending her child to pre-school because the school was instilling notions of authority and hierarchy in her daughter. These peers could not understand that Law saw the pre-school as a space for her daughter to meet other Chinese children, learn some Cantonese, and feel comfortable with her ethnic identity. They identified *refusing* school as an example of radical action, but they did not view immersion in a culturally diverse setting as a similar action.

Anarchists of color from the Planting Seeds Community Awareness Project hope to combat the same misunderstandings in a zine titled *Answers for White People on Appropriation, Hair and Anti-Racist Struggle*. Citing mohawks as imitations of traditional Native American hair styles and dreadlocks as part of the African diaspora’s Rastafarian tradition, authors Colin Donovan and Qwo-Li Driskill request that white activists refrain from wearing these styles: “a true appreciation of other cultures,” they write, “means fighting against the forces trying to destroy them, not taking them on as your own” (Donovan and Driskill). Donovan and Driskill insist that metaphorical and cultural histories of race *matter*. They ask anarchists to see cultural choices within American histories of race even as they recognize the resistant possibilities of anarchism as an ideological framework. Critiques like these from people of color within the anarchist community can supplement the commentary of fiction writers like Butler and



Hopkinson. Together, writers and fellow anarchists urge their activist peers to analyze the histories, contexts, and implications of their metaphors because these metaphors are essential building blocks of direct action.

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<sup>1</sup> See chapters one, two, and three for the full development of these arguments.

<sup>2</sup> See the introduction for a history and discussion of the terms “industrial” and “primitive.”

<sup>3</sup> The abbreviation “sf” can be used to denote “speculative fiction” or “science fiction.” In this chapter, I will use it in reference to the broader term, speculative fiction. Although both Nalo Hopkinson and Octavia Butler identify with the term “science fiction,” some critics might argue that they fall more comfortably into the category of fantasy because their work incorporates very little science. The term “speculative fiction” encompasses both science fiction and fantasy and therefore incorporates both understandings of their fiction.

<sup>4</sup> Because anarchists are so diverse, this chapter cannot account for all anarchist perspectives. I will attempt to limit this problem by focusing *primarily* on that group of anarchists who see themselves as “anti-work.” This includes but is not limited to those who consider themselves “primitivist anarchists,” “anti-civilization anarchists,” or “green anarchists.” These final three groups are largely the same, although some individuals may quibble with the use of one term over the other. In this text, I will refer to “primitivist” and “anti-civilization” anarchists interchangeably. I will avoid the term “green” anarchism solely because this term sometimes overlaps with or evokes associations with more mainstream environmentalist thought.

<sup>5</sup> The term “diy” refers both to the act of “doing-it-yourself” and to an ideology that rejects corporate models of production. Many punk bands embrace a diy philosophy by recording and releasing their own albums or creating their own clothing. Among contemporary anarchists, diy may refer to skills such as bicycle repair, gardening, construction, sewing, or silk-screening, among many others.

<sup>6</sup> In the most extreme cases this can lead to anarcho-capitalism, which favors a libertarian approach to market forces and social life. This complete rejection of leftist attitudes is rare, however, and many leftist anarchists would dispute the very term “anarcho-capitalist” as a contradiction.

<sup>7</sup> Contemporary anarchists often cite these two movements as inspiration. See Abbie Hoffman’s autobiography for more information on the Yippies and Tom McDonough’s *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents* for more on the situationists.

<sup>8</sup> For discussions of punk culture and its relationship to anarchism, see Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture*, Ian Glasper’s *The Day the Country Died: A History of Anarcho Punk 1980 to 1984*, Craig O’Hara’s *Philosophy of Punk*, Ross Haenfler’s *Straight Edge*, and Jeff Ferrell’s *Tearing Down the Streets*.

<sup>9</sup> By “terrorism,” I mean tactics such as assassinations and/or bombings that target human life. Although contemporary anarchists have not used such strategies, anarchists have historically adopted them around the world. The Russian Narodniks assassinated Tsar

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Alexander II, and American anarchists Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman attempted to assassinate steel magnate Henry Clay Frick in 1892 (Yaroslavsky; Goldman). President William McKinley's assassin also claimed to be an anarchist, though he was not accepted by Goldman's anarchist circle. Emma Goldman's *Living My Life* offers a useful perspective on terrorism and anarchist ideology, and Daniel Guérin's *Anarchism* provides a useful general history of anarchist politics.

<sup>10</sup> See Rik Scarce's *Eco-Warriors*, Giorel Curran's *21<sup>st</sup> Century Dissent*, Christopher Manes's *Green Rage*, and Zimmerman, et al's *Environmental Philosophy* for histories of the environmentalist and animal rights movements.

<sup>11</sup> The World Bank and the IMF offer major loans to poor nations based on the promise that these debts would be repaid through the use of government "austerity" plans that slash social services and privatize many government-owned resources. The World Trade Organization complements this work by policing trade agreements between nations. It has often been criticized for ensuring the free flow of capital with little regard for labor rights or environmental preservation.

For more on neoliberalism, the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO, see Price's *Before the Bulldozer*, Stiglitz's *Globalization and its Discontents*, and Yates's *Naming the System*.

<sup>12</sup> See Purkis and Brown's *Changing Anarchism* and Cockburn, St. Clair, and Sekula's *Five Days that Shook the World* for more on the mass protest tactics of the anti-globalization movement.

<sup>13</sup> See Cockburn, St. Clair, and Sekula's *Five Days that Shook the World* and Elizabeth Betita Martinez's "Where was the Color in Seattle?" for more details on the Seattle 1999 protests. *The Black Bloc Papers* offers insight into the history and ideology of the Black Bloc.

<sup>14</sup> Contemporary anarchism, especially as related to the anti-globalization movement, often has links to poststructuralist theory. The rejection of metanarratives and stable identities, for instance, is attractive to many anarchists. See Lewis Call's *Postmodern Anarchism* for more on this trend.

The anti-globalization movement has also sparked an intense debate about activist tactics and ideology based on questions about the existence of a new world order. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt argue in *Empire* that a new resistant politics of the global "multitude" has begun to replace a politics of the nation-state. This multitude will confront Empire, a global, fluid form of power that is no longer located in a particular nation. Hardt and Negri's argument aligns with the symbolic actions relying on mass spectacle that have become increasingly popular. Anti-globalization protests are an example of global and ideological confederations, while groups such as Reclaim the Streets focus on insurrection of the multitude by holding unauthorized parties that take place on major roadways.

Many traditional Marxists and other academic critics dispute Hardt and Negri for their failure to acknowledge the continued significance of the nation-state in both dominance and resistance. The collection *Debating Empire* edited by Gopal Balakrishnan nicely encapsulates this and other controversies about Hardt and Negri's argument.

<sup>15</sup> An "affinity group" is an unaffiliated, non-hierarchical group of individuals who come together for a specific activist purpose. This purpose is usually concrete, such as planning

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an action, but may be broad, such as promoting anarchist politics. Affinity groups are usually small (under twenty members) and composed of members who know one another well. They are thus seen as a means of preventing infiltration by police agents when activists are planning illegal actions. Affinity groups are typically non-permanent, meaning that they disband after completing their chosen task. Members may then reconvene in a new affinity group formation for the next action.

<sup>16</sup> Albert hopes to remedy this problem in his book *Parecon*, which proposes a future society based on a participatory, democratic, anarchistic economic and social structure.

<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, as this anonymous author also acknowledges, primitivism has some glaring problems that trouble many fellow anarchists. Michael Albert identifies John Zerzan as the center of these problems. Zerzan is the most well-known theorist associated with anti-civilization anarchism, and his work is highly controversial. Although he advocates the destruction of civilization and the hunter-gatherer lifestyle, Zerzan is also famous for praising of “Unabomber” Ted Kaczynski’s anti-civilization tract and for communicating with the imprisoned Kaczynski. Zerzan denounces Kaczynski’s tactics, but his sympathy for the Unabomber’s political perspective has made him an easy target for those—anarchist or otherwise—who see his positions as extreme, distasteful, or problematic. Moreover, Zerzan stands at an extreme of primitivist anarchism that breaks altogether with the leftist tradition. As Zerzan remarks, “leftism—meaning a workerist, productionist orientation and the ‘organizer’ mentality, is in decline everywhere. [. . .] Leftism is going the way of the dodo, though there are still some remnants around. AK Press is one example, with their penchant for embracing relics like Bookchin and Chomsky” (Zerzan, “Interview”). Although even many anti-civilization activists disagree with Zerzan’s anti-leftist position, there are sometimes hazy areas between anti-leftist primitivism and leftist anarcho-primitivism because nearly all anarcho-primitivists cite his essays to defend the shift to hunter-gatherer lifestyles. Many who espouse primitivist ideas participate in leftist activist projects while also admiring the work of anti-leftist primitivists like Zerzan.

<sup>18</sup> Although Sheree Thomas argues in her seminal 2000 anthology *Dark Matter* that African-American science fiction is not new, the study of black science fiction and its identification as such *is* new. Thomas makes a strong case for including W.E.B. DuBois’s “The Comet,” George Schuyler’s *Black No More*, and even Ellison’s *Invisible Man* in the tradition of black science fiction and fantasy. Her anthology marked a turning point in the literary *study* of black speculative fiction, and the last several decades have also been important in the growth of black writers who view themselves as science fiction/fantasy writers. The literary establishment, as her text indicates, has only recently seen black speculative fiction, outside of the solo figures of Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler, as a phenomenon at all. In concert with this shift, black writers and readers of science fiction have recently taken steps to remedy their own sense of isolation and alienation in the largely white sf community. Charles R. Saunders’s 2000 essay “Why Blacks Should Read (and Write) Science Fiction” was a marked departure from his 1978 article “Why Blacks Don’t Read Science Fiction” (published in the fifth edition of a fanzine known as *Windhaven*). Similarly, Nalo Hopkinson notes that the Carl Brandon Society (named after a fictional black science fiction fan) has worked to promote the work of science fiction writers of color while also building a community for these writers (Nelson 105).

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<sup>19</sup> In 1993, when *Sower* was published, the country had just suffered through a recession, and the recent Clinton election campaign had called for welfare reform to severely restrict government benefits to low-income Americans. Meanwhile, public debate on global warming was growing, and the government was negotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA], which would open up pathways for the movement of corporate money across Canada, Mexico, and the United States without permitting workers that same freedom. NAFTA encouraged American corporations to uproot American factories in search of cheap labor in Mexico, laying off American workers while sparking Mexican migration from agricultural spaces into urban locations with low-wage industrial work (Hufbauer 47). Butler's 1993 vision of a dystopia, then, was also an urgent commentary on the consequences of contemporary American political decisions.

<sup>20</sup> Zines are "do-it-yourself" [diy] publications common to pop culture fan cultures and activist communities. Self-produced documents with varying degrees of sophistication, zines are often periodicals, though they may also be stand-alone publications. They exhibit a great deal of variation, from small sheets of white paper stapled together and featuring hand-written text to colorful, carefully drawn illustrations and print with hand-sewn bindings. Zines usually have a very small distribution through alternative bookstores and among committed zine-readers, who can access a particular zine by contacting the author and sending her money or some form of barter (vegan cookies are a popular suggestion!). Although zines first became popular when sophisticated word processing was more difficult and the internet was not an option, they have retained a central stature among activists in part for their diy "authenticity." Most zines still employ hand-written text, for instance, even though word processing would make typed text a more time-effective choice, and sites like Zinelibrary.net have attempted to mix the zine tradition with the convenience of online distribution by collecting PDF versions of print zines and offering them for free online.

The content of zines varies widely. Some follow a narrative structure, usually autobiographical but occasionally fictional. In these cases, an individual zine might be an installment in a larger, serialized narrative. Because zines are usually published irregularly, however, even serialized stories are often read in isolation. These narratives are often illustrated, sometimes in full cartoon format and sometimes simply with crude drawings in the margins.

Non-narrative zines may feature articles by several contributors, illustrations, or an eclectic mix of personal observations and factual material. Some zines provide instruction in various tasks, from destroying genetically modified crops to providing basic first aid at protest. Moreover, although most zines include original material, it is not uncommon for zines to reprint classic radical texts. See Duncombe's *Notes from Underground* for more on the zine form and zine culture.

<sup>21</sup> The zine is undated. It was uploaded to *Zine Library* in November 2005, and textual references suggest that it was written sometime between 2001 and 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Although this text is not dated, it was uploaded to *Zine Library* in 2005, and references in the text reveal that it was written after 2002.

<sup>23</sup> See the introduction or Lemke's *Primitivist Modernism* for a fuller discussion of modernist primitivism.

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<sup>24</sup> The final claim is especially suspect. Zerzan cites Arnold DeVries's 1952 *Primitive Man and his Food* to bolster his position on near painless childbirth. DeVries was a raw foods enthusiast whose book, *Primitive Man and his Food*, remains popular among those who pursue alternative nutritional lifestyles. This text supports the notion of painless childbirth by citing a number of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century white observers of Native American life. Lewis and Clark and Washington Irving, among others, observe that "squaws" seem to give birth with greater ease than white women (12).

<sup>25</sup> Robert Lee and Irven Devore's collection *Man the Hunter* launched hunter-gatherer studies in earnest in the late 1960s, and it retains respect as the founding text of the discipline. Anarcho-primitivists, however, tend to rely too heavily on its contents and on the work of scholars who align themselves fully with this tradition.

Although it is often difficult to trace the exact source of anarcho-primitivist information due to inadequate citations, it is clear that John Zerzan's work has provided much of the basis for future anarcho-primitivist writings. Zerzan himself cites an array of anthropologists, archaeologists, and historians by name in his texts, but he often fails to include a bibliography. Piecing together his sources, however, reveals several problems. First, Zerzan relies on texts from the 1930s and 1950s without commenting on more recent critiques, and second, he includes material that has been wholly discredited. Although Zerzan's most widely known essay, "Future Primitive," appeared in 1994, it includes references to studies of the Philippine Tasaday, a group of supposedly "Stone Age" hunter-gatherers who garnered much attention in the 1970s. In 1986, reporters and scientists found that house-dwelling tribal peoples had participated in a hoax, performing "Stone Age" behavior by living in caves and shedding their clothes for the benefit of outsiders (Headland). Even years later, Zerzan cites studies on the Tasaday uncritically.

Several more reputable works frequently cited by Zerzan and other anarcho-primitivists also deserve discussion. Based on the bibliographic information that is available, I will outline some of the most commonly cited texts below, suggesting some of the problems with how anarcho-primitivists cite them.

Marshall Sahlins's essay "The Original Affluent Society," published in his 1972 *Stone Age Economics*, argues that hunter-gatherers have abundant access to nutritious food and that they engage in far less labor than Westerners. Sahlins's calculation, however, was based on Richard Lee's study of the !Kung San, which only accounted for the time hunter-gatherers spent acquiring food. It did not include housework, food preparation, child care, manufacturing housing and tools, creating clothing, or other non-subsistence forms of work. When Lee took additional tasks into account, he found that female hunter-gatherers average 40.1 hours of work each week while males average 44.5 hours. Even this figure did not include child care, which is largely the purview of !Kung San women (R. Lee 278-80). Most Westerners do work more than 40.1 or 44.5 hours of week if we take into account cooking, cleaning, and shopping, so Sahlins and Lee continue to make a salient point. The anarcho-primitivist celebration of hunter-gatherer work days, however, nearly always cites Sahlins's much more optimistic figures.

Mark Nathan Cohen's *Health and the Rise of Civilization* (1989) has also been a favorite of anarcho-primitivist writers. John Zerzan and others cite Cohen to argue that hunter-gatherers have much better health and equally long life spans as contemporary Westerners. They are correct that Cohen's survey of medical and anthropological

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material suggests that hunter-gatherers avoid a wide array of “First World” diseases, including heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and high cholesterol. Cohen does note, however, that hunter-gatherers experience a variety of infectious diseases, depending on their environment, and that they exhibit very high infant mortality rates and quite low life expectancies (48). Their life spans and infant mortality rates, Cohen argues, are better than those of contemporary *Third World* peoples, not First World peoples.

In addition to these and similar problems, anarcho-primitivists fail to engage the larger debates in anthropology about the definition of “hunter-gatherers.” Can any contemporary or even past tribal organizations be seen as *solely* hunter-gatherers, or have they always interacted with outside groups? Is it an overly simplistic generalization that hunter-gatherers maintain egalitarian and non-accumulating societies (Winterhalder)? These questions have been a major source of conflict among anthropologists in the past decades, and many scholars would feel uncomfortable making any such generalizations. Instead, contemporary anthropology tends to examine particular cultures in their historical and global contexts rather than using these observations to generalize about hunter-gatherers as a whole. See Barnard’s *Hunter-Gatherers in History, Archaeology and Anthropology* for some more recent scholarly perspectives on hunter-gatherers.

<sup>26</sup> Despite their exaggerations and omissions, Godesky, Heinberg, and Zerzan are notable in citing their sources. Recent texts by anonymous or collective authors such as *Feral Forager* or *Back to Basics Volume 3: Rewilding* simply repeat anthropological claims without giving any citations at all. *Feral Forager* and *Back to Basics* insist that primitive peoples enjoyed better health and a more nutritious diet than modern humans, though they offer no source or discussion of scholarly debates (*Feral Forager*; Green Anarchy and the Wild Roots Collective).

<sup>27</sup> In the 1980s, debates over the value of “multicultural” education and “canon wars” over which literature deserved primacy in American education raged in the academy. Allan Bloom’s 1987 *The Closing of the American Mind*, which vociferously defended the traditional canon of white male authors, was at the center of this debate. In the 1990s and 2000s, scholars like Michael Eric Dyson, bell hooks, Herman Gray, and Tricia Rose among many others, have gained both academic and public attention with analyses of race and its representation in American culture.

<sup>28</sup> The events in her two novels take place between 2024 and 2090.

<sup>29</sup> The technology that appears in *Parable of the Talents*, including slave collars and “housetrucks” that act as weapons and homes, suggests that Butler has some fear of technology as an oppressive force. Lauren’s utopia, however, is also predicated on technology: the spaceship. Butler’s depiction of technology and “primitive” living, then, is not wholly consistent. Social and economic structures, she indicates, may be better at creating equality and justice than the technologies themselves.

<sup>30</sup> The Fabulous Forager’s real name, Giulianna Lamanna, is evident on her blog, while Urban Scout and Penny Scout keep their identities more hidden. Their first names, Peter and Emily, sometimes appear in comments from friends and family to their online postings, but they do not reveal their last names.

<sup>31</sup> These photos can be seen at <<http://pennyscout.wordpress.com/2007/09/24/rabbitstick-recap/>> and <<http://www.urbanscout.org/photography/>>.

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<sup>32</sup> Like Urban Scout, self-described anarcho-primitivists and “rewilders” sometimes live in cities and adapt their “neo-primitive” survival skills to urban spaces.

<sup>33</sup> The “steampunk” trend is especially interesting on this front. Steampunk refers to a speculative fiction genre popular among some punks and/or anarchists of embracing and imitating the Victorian period, when steam power was the center of industrial production. Alan Moore and Kevin O’Neill’s *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, for instance, is a fantastical accounts of small rebellious collective composed of fictional characters from Victorian literature. The group is led by *Dracula*’s Mina Harker (now divorced and returned to her maiden name of Mina Murray), and it humorously confronts the colonial and racist problems of Victorian England while battling alien spaceships and solving mysteries. Steampunk combines a desire for the past and a fascination with industrial production, and although it emerged as a largely literary fascination, it has now led some punks to incorporate modified elements of Victorian dress into their wardrobes. Although steampunk is clearly distinct from anarcho-primitivist tendencies or even anti-work strains of anarchism, its interest in the layering of time and exploration of different modes of production offers an interesting complement to anarcho-primitivism within the larger anarchist subculture.

<sup>34</sup> Known familiarly as the Wobblies, the IWW grew to its height in the first two decades of the twentieth century as it aimed to organize the proletariat into “one big union.”

<sup>35</sup> Even in this era, the anti-work proletarian had overtones of the “primitive,” as Wobbly discourse often identified the hobo’s changing habitat as the “jungle” (DePastino 350-51).

<sup>36</sup> Although the hobo certainly reflects anarchist fascinations with the Wobbly period of industrial organizing, it also fits the anarchist interest with nomadic outlaw figures from any historical period. In this sense, the pirate may also be a companion for the hobo in anarchist lore. Pirates represent a law-defying tradition and a sense of radical individualist egalitarianism, and anarchists frequently fly the “pirate” flag (a black background bearing a skull and crossbones) or adopt pirate-like aliases. Significantly, pirate imagery also links anarchists, urban or rural, to the primitivist tradition. As anarchist writers Hakim Bey and Jason Godesky argue, pirates frequently abandoned Western lifestyles for Native American traditions and communities in the early days of colonial expansion to the Americas (“A Pirate’s Life for Me”).

<sup>37</sup> According to historian John Stover, railway mileage in the United States reached its height in 1916, coinciding with the IWW’s heyday (164-66). In 1916, railway mileage was 254,000 miles (202). This declined to 220,000 miles in 1959 and 170,000 in 1995 (258).

<sup>38</sup> Anarchists were by no means the initiators of the environmentalist movement, although they do share some ideology with early environmentalists. American environmentalism emerged as a counterpoint to the 1960s New Left. Made up of liberals and conservatives enamored of hunting, fishing, and open spaces, the movement originally portrayed liberating the earth as a wholly different task than liberating humanity from racism or capitalism. Some of the most radical of these early environmentalists had anarchistic attitudes about resistance. When Dave Foreman and a handful of other environmentalists became disgruntled with the liberal caution of mainstream groups like the Sierra Club in 1979, they formed Earth First! as an alternative. Inspired by Edward Abbey’s rebellious

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environmentalist novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Earth First! began a tradition of “direct action” that included sabotaging construction sites, spiking trees with nails to foul up chainsaw blades, and sitting in trees to prevent logging. The organization’s radical tactics and small group structure had affiliations with anarchist thinking, and although the original members did not identify as anarchists, Earth First! soon began to attract young recruits who *did* call themselves anarchists. Today, the loosely conceived “organization” is made up largely of self-described anarchists. See Manes’s *Green Rage* and Scarce’s *Eco-Warriors* for a full history of Earth First!

<sup>39</sup> Like many zine and blog writers, the author chooses not to use her real name. Although the name Hannah Potassium is evocative, it does not appear to have any clearly identifiable meaning. The element Potassium is represented in the Periodic Table as a K, so it is possible that her pseudonym references her last initial.

<sup>40</sup> Hakim Bey is a pen name of the writer Peter Lamborn Wilson. His notion of a “temporary autonomous zone” describes contingent spaces of resistance within oppressive capitalist culture. The temporary autonomous zone privileges the fleeting pleasure and freedom of insurrection over the contaminated process of permanent revolution. “For the time being,” Bey writes, “we concentrate our force on temporary ‘power surges,’ avoiding all entanglements with ‘permanent solutions.’” A temporary autonomous zone might be a “Reclaim the Streets” party in which activists swarm the streets to prevent car traffic; it might be the growth of non-hierarchical communication and news networks on the internet; or it may be the sense of freedom that traveler punks get from hopping trains and avoiding capitalist entanglements.

<sup>41</sup> See Chapter One for a full explanation of these terms and the ensuing debate.

<sup>42</sup> Hopkinson models her character names and portions of her plot on Derek Walcott’s drama *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*.

<sup>43</sup> A duppy refers to a spirit, often a malevolent one that remains on earth to haunt or harm living beings. In *Brown Girl in the Ring*, Rudy transforms living humans into duppies by trapping their souls in his “duppy bowl.” While the bowl survives, the duppy must do his bidding. Two living humans, Mi-Jeanne and Melba, are transformed into duppies in this fashion. Because their spirits must obey Rudy, their bodies follow suit. When the duppy bowl breaks, however, the soul is free to return to the host body or, if the body is dead, to escape the human world.

<sup>44</sup> An infoshop is a term used by anarchists to refer to a bookstore or meeting center run by anarchists for one another and for the larger community. They typically sell radical books, zines, t-shirts, buttons, stickers, and other small products in addition to offering free community meeting space for activist organizations. Infoshops usually operate as non-profit ventures.

<sup>45</sup> A beach seiner, according to Bowstern, fishes by setting out a large, stationary net that is anchored to the shore and weighted to the bottom of the ocean. The net and its accompanying equipment are known as a seine. Beach seiners collect their catch by wading out into the sea to drag in the net.

<sup>46</sup> The homesteading tradition refers to the ability to legally acquire a home by squatting in an abandoned property and earning the right to keep it by improving it with one’s own labor. At various times, New York City has permitted homesteading in an attempt to revive declining neighborhoods and housing prices. In 1986, however, the city began to



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pull back support for homesteading as property costs in the city skyrocketed. Since then, the city has not outlawed homesteading, but it has not added new properties to the list of approved homesteads, effectively eliminating legal support for such projects. Squatters persisted, however, because the rising price of housing meant that many working-class people were priced out of the market.

## *Conclusion*

Tropes of the primitive and the industrial continue to fascinate activists and to guide them in their attempts to re-write the linear history of progress. By employing and intermingling these oppositions, social movements establish a sense of agency over defining the past and controlling the political prospects for the future. These metaphors also allow radicals to envision the future within the parameters of already established cultural understandings, presenting a just society as possible, accessible, and culturally knowable. In return, however, activists must walk through the mine field of cultural associations, including racism and class prejudice, that reside in these terms. Sometimes they do so admirably, embracing the complexity of their metaphors as a tool to draw attention to racist language. Other times, they become locked in the implications of their own metaphors, unable to acknowledge multiple meanings or to justify their own actions.

The Black Panthers renewed a form of resistant African-American primitivism that had appeared first in the Harlem Renaissance. Like their artistic ancestors and cohorts, they struggled to draw the line between perpetuating racist metaphors and celebrating blackness in socially productive ways. Their performative style of dress and action, their rhetoric, and their imagery incorporated the same kinds of questions about art and politics that confronted Black Arts Movement writers. The Panther aesthetic contributed to the Black Arts Movement in addition to the Black Power movement, shielding the Panthers from government prosecution and helping them make political arguments about the status of the black “lumpenproletariat” in building a socialist revolution. At the same time, the Panthers’ fondness for inflated rhetoric meant that many members had difficulty distinguishing between metaphors and calls for action. Did the

phrase “off the pigs,” members wondered, really encourage Panthers to shoot police officers or did it simply comment on the oppressive police presence in black neighborhoods?

The League of Revolutionary Black Workers adopted primitivist images similar to those that the Black Panthers employed. The League, however, refused to see urban ghettos as signs of a post-industrial world peopled only with the lumpenproletariat. Instead, its members embraced the notion of an “industrial jungle,” rejecting union-management cooperation in favor of wildcat strikes and independent black nationalist workers’ organizations. As a result, they put race at the center of American labor politics and drew attention to organized labor’s unwillingness to adequately challenge racism in American factories. Moreover, by creating visual art and poetry, the League positioned industrial workers as ideal *artists* for the Black Arts Movement’s project of creating democratic and politically engaged art. Although their art rarely attracted attention as part of the Black Arts canon, it did provide a commentary on the League’s aggressive rhetoric and celebratory images of an abstract Africa. League publications urged auto workers to see themselves as readers and potential writers of poetry, recasting art into a form of labor rather than an inaccessible element of “high culture.” If workers could successfully read and analyze poetry, they might in turn see the League’s very similar rhetoric as metaphorical and in need of interpretation.

As the Black Power era came to a close, the Socialist Workers Party and the International Socialists registered a shift from the politics of the Black Panthers and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. These socialist organizations attempted to deal with the decline of mass protest actions by retreating to more quotidian projects in the

1970s and 1980s. They sent their members into industrial jobs to live out the mythic narrative of the Marxist factory worker. In doing so, they valued identity and the process of “becoming” a mythic political figure, a project that was also important to African-American writers at the time. For black writers, the novel had returned to prominence after the drama and poetry of the Black Arts Movement, and the neo-slave narrative became the form of choice. By imagining the psychological and physical experiences of slave characters, black writers challenged the Black Power denunciations of “Uncle Toms” and “Mammies” while trying to “become” the mythic figure of the resistant slave. Neo-slave narratives questioned simplistic and romantic notions of mythic political narratives, and socialists soon came to a similar critique as they entered factories and found themselves confronted with the realities of daily struggle in the workplace. During this period, both socialists and writers struggled with postmodern questions about the validity of meta-narratives. Instead of rejecting these narratives, however, they constructed mini-narratives of personal experience in order to revise rather than renounce traditional political meta-narratives.

More than twenty years after the IS and the SWP began sending their cadre into factories, contemporary anarchists have revived and renewed tropes of the industrial and the primitive. In doing so, they have offered a correction to the work of their forbears in the New Left by insisting that these tropes must now be used to describe the environmental destruction of the planet. For many young anarchists, the “primitive” is an ideal alternative to our corrupt industrial civilization. As a result, these activists adopt “hunter-gatherer” lifestyles, romanticizing anthropological notions about tribal hunter-gatherers from the 1960s while ignoring the racialized histories of the “primitive.” At the

same time, some anarcho-primitivists have been successful at mimicking corporate media techniques, joking about their own rhetoric and reversing the normal process of consumerist appropriation. In doing so, they begin to break down the binary between “civilized” and “primitive” that their ideology seems to support. Other anarchists who do not identify with anarcho-primitivism have also demonstrated their ability to use “diy” survival skills to build relationships with working-class or people of color communities. And while the apocalyptic, dystopian works of recent speculative fiction authors such as Nalo Hopkinson and Octavia Butler offer useful critiques of anarchist anti-civilization projects, anarchists of color have also begun to provide a similar perspective from within the movement. Like Butler and Hopkinson, these critics stress that cultural signs *matter* as expressions of political ideology. Because the creators of these tropes are still active in political work today, literary analysis of anarchist metaphors has the potential to influence their future use. A more complex understanding of the primitive and industrial as loaded terms may be able to benefit the future language and action of today’s anarchists.

These four movements demonstrate a trajectory of resistance in the United States that mirrors cultural changes from the Black Arts Movement through contemporary science fiction. African-American literature variously acts as a complement, an inspiration, and a corrective to American radical movements because it has always attempted to balance the pragmatic desire for anti-racist political change with the aesthetic requirements of literature. By choosing these four movements as representative examples, I do not mean to suggest that they are the only organizations that employ primitive and industrial tropes or to interact with literature. In the New Left period alone,

the American Indian Movement, the Chicano Movement, the Red Guards, the Weather Underground, Students for a Democratic Society, and the Yippies, among many others, invoked similar metaphors. Moreover, I do not claim that the primitive and the industrial are the most important tropes that activists employ, that they are employed universally, or that they should be either embraced or rejected in the future. Instead, I hope that my choice of metaphors has illustrated how activists often employ large, abstract tropes in ways that might initially appear to be overly simplistic “propaganda.” In some cases, the metaphors do fall into this trap. At other times, however, activists engage with their metaphors on more complex levels, referencing and challenging cultural histories of a term or using it to inspire potential recruits and renew the enthusiasm of older members.

Moreover, I see this project as both a means of illustrating the complex literary work that activists already produce and of encouraging them to deepen this work. If activists are to succeed in building a more just society, they need to become skilled literary and political critics willing to analyze their own language and behaviors. My dissertation, situated within T.V. Reed’s notion of the “poetics of social movements,” contributes to such a project by making social movements the object of literary study. This approach benefits both political actors and literary critics. It encourages activists to move beyond simplistic propaganda into linguistic complexity and urges writers and literary critics to see that complexity need not result in a dead end of political uncertainty and inaction. My analysis of core metaphors such as the primitive and the industrial, however, is only a first step. From other broad radical concepts such as “the people” to more specific, single-organization terminology like Earth First!’s “monkeywrencher,” the tropes of social movements remain worthy of literary as well as historical and

sociological study. Contemporary movements against the war in Iraq, leftist media outlets like Independent Media Centers and *Democracy Now!*, or labor struggles among American immigrants like the Coalition of Immokalee Workers are all possible subjects of future study, as are literary forms such as graphic novels or community writing projects like those produced by New Orleans's Neighborhood Story Project. The fraught transition between narrative and action is the meeting point between literature and politics. This is the juncture that studies in the "poetics of social movements" attempt to navigate, seeing in it the possibility for productive literary criticism and more nuanced political language.

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Curriculum Vitae  
**URSULA McTAGGART**

520 W. Howe Street  
Bloomington, IN 47403  
(812) 331-1245 (h) / (812) 219-4060 (c)  
umctagga@indiana.edu

Department of English  
Ballantine Hall 442  
Indiana University  
Bloomington, IN 47405

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**EDUCATION**

PhD in English Literature and American Studies, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN  
*Expected completion:* June 2008

MA in English Literature, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, 2004

BA in English Literature with High Honors, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI,  
2002

*Research and Teaching Interests:*

20<sup>th</sup>-century American literature and culture, the literature and language of social  
movements, African-American slave narratives and autobiography, the Black Arts  
Movement

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**DISSERTATION**

*Project Title:* Radicalism in America's Industrial Jungle: Primitive and Industrial  
Metaphors in Activist Texts

*Committee:* Purnima Bose and Margo Crawford (co-directors), De Witt Kilgore, Robert  
Terrill

My dissertation bridges American Studies and literary studies by examining the relationship between twentieth-century American activist publications and literary movements. Through studies of the publications, imagery, and actions of the Black Panthers, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, two socialist organizations of the 1970s, and contemporary anarchists, I argue that these social texts respond to and inform their contemporaneous literary movements. Moreover, the metaphors of the primitive and the industrial serve as fundamental organizing tropes for these avowedly revolutionary activists. Primitive and industrial metaphors describe a dystopian capitalist society *and* frame the narratives of a utopian future. Archival research, interviews with former participants, and readings of activist newspapers allow me to illustrate how these movements establish a dialogue with the Black Arts Movement and the neo-slave narrative. My project debunks the myth that political texts are nothing more than simplistic propaganda, reading them instead as a form of social "poetics" that enhances our understanding of the relationship between the political and the literary.

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## PUBLICATIONS

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### *Published Articles:*

“Writing Baseball into History: The *Pittsburgh Courier*, Integration, and Baseball in a War of Position,” *American Studies* 47.1 (Spring 2006): 113-132.

### *Under Review:*

“‘Opening the Door’: The Hogarth Press as Virginia Woolf’s Cosmopolitan Outsiders Society,” request to revise and resubmit, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*

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## NOTES

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“Artistry and Activism: The Poetry of Irena Klepfisz.” *Against the Current* 128 (May/June 2007): 10-11

“Organizing ‘Nineteenth-Century Style’: Organizing Graduate Employees without Collective Bargaining,” *Against the Current* 114 (January/February 2005): 9-10

“Activism and ‘Corporate Social Responsibility’: Inside the CSR Mythology,” *Against the Current* 110 (July/August 2004): 27-30

“Dow Chemical: From Midland to Bhopal,” *Against the Current* 106 (Sept/Oct 2003): 27-33

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## CONFERENCE PAPERS

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“Resistant Metaphors?: The Lynched Body in Activist Iconography,” Image and Imagination in the Visual and Verbal Arts, Society for Critical Exchange Mini-Conference, Midwest Modern Language Association Conference, Cleveland, Ohio (November 2007)

“Making the Political Personal: Holocaust History, Contemporary Politics, and Personal Narrative in Irena Klepfisz’s Poetry,” Poetry and Politics Conference, University of Stirling, Stirling, Scotland (July 2006)

“Past and Present Traumas: Personal Narrative and the Reconstruction of Holocaust History in Irena Klepfisz’s Poetry,” The Politics of Poetry, University of Dayton LitFest, Dayton, Ohio (February 2006)

“An Activist Model of Fair Trade: United Students Against Sweatshops and the University’s Role in Apparel Production,” The University and Fair Trade Conference, Indiana University, Bloomington (September 2005)

“Writing Baseball into History: The *Pittsburgh Courier*, Integration, and Baseball in a War of Position,” New Directions in African American Literature, Theory, and Cultural Studies, Indiana University, Bloomington (April 2004)

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## INVITED PRESENTATIONS

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“Panthers in the Urban Jungle: Primitivist Imagery and the Black Panther Party,” Images and Public Culture: Understanding Images Across the Humanities, Indiana University, Bloomington (April 2008)

“Postmodernism and Recovering the Truth in Riverbend’s *Baghdad Burning*,” Guest Lecturer, English L142, “Writing Disaster,” Professor Susan Gubar, Indiana University, Bloomington (April 2008)

“How the Panther Lost its Spots: Primitivism and Revolutionary Aesthetics,” Americanist Research Colloquium, Indiana University, Bloomington (January 2008)

“Writing Baseball into History: The *Pittsburgh Courier*, Integration, and Baseball in a War of Position,” Virginia A. Gunderson Award Honorable Mention Presenter, American Studies Graduate Student Colloquia, Indiana University, Bloomington (November 2004)

“Corporate Social Responsibility and the Activist Response,” Corporate Accountability Speaker Series, Solidarity, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (March 2004)

“Midland and Bhopal Take On Dow Chemical,” Guest Lecturer, English 135, “Science and Society,” Graduate Student Instructor Sayan Bhattacharyya, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (March 2004)

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## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

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Teaching Assistant, Introduction to Literature L141: “Vertigo,” Fall 2007, with Professor Margo Crawford

This course explores the sense of disorientation associated with shifting identities, examining how this feeling impacts race, gender, class, sexuality, and nationality. Texts include Jean-Paul Sartre’s *No Exit*, Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy*, Margaret Edson’s *Wit*, Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues*, and Anna Deavere Smith’s *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. I currently lead a discussion section of this course and plan to lecture on Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy*.

Teaching Assistant, Introduction to Literature L142: “Writing Disaster,” Spring 2007, with Professor Susan Gubar

This course examined the role of trauma and disaster in 20<sup>th</sup>-century American prose and poetry. Texts included Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, Cynthia Ozick’s “The Shawl,” and Iraqi author Riverbend’s blog about the Iraq war titled *Baghdad Burning*. I led a discussion section and delivered lectures on possession in *Beloved* and on Riverbend’s response to postmodernity in *Baghdad Burning*.

Instructor, Introduction to Argumentative Writing W170: "Radical Chic, Terrorism, or Social Justice?: Representations of Protest in American Popular Culture," Spring 2006-Fall 2006

This course, which I designed and taught independently, investigated tropes of radicalism in popular culture as a vehicle for teaching introductory composition. Students examined newspaper articles, advertisements, and movies to determine the disparate ways that popular culture embraces, rejects, and commodifies political dissent. Texts for this course include essays by Howard Zinn, Dave Zirin, and Naomi Klein.

Instructor, Basic Writing W131, Spring 2005-Fall 2005

This is an introductory composition course that I taught independently based on my own version of a departmental syllabus. It is designed for students who need extra help with their writing and grammar skills. Students may self-select this course or may be recommended by an advisor, and the class population tends to include a substantial number of first-generation college students. With the help of short readings such as Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" or Stephen King's "Why We Crave Horror Movies," students are asked to produce papers based on rubrics such as "evaluation," "explanation," "proposal to solve a problem," and "cause and effect."

Instructor, Introduction to Composition W131, Fall 2003-Fall 2004

Indiana University's standard composition course, W131, uses cultural studies methods to teach analytical writing skills to incoming students. I instructed this course independently based on a syllabus that I developed from a departmental model. Short academic essays by Benjamin DeMott, Michael Dyson, Susan Bordo, Deborah Tannen, and others help students learn reading skills. Using these texts as models, students interpret texts such as movies or physical spaces.

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## **AWARDS AND HONORS**

J.A. Robbins Memorial Award, Indiana University, April 2008

Tarkington Dissertation Fellowship, Indiana University, Spring 2008

Frankel Fellowship, Indiana University, 2002-present

Susan Clements Memorial Travel Award, April 2007

Completed PhD Qualifying Exams "With Distinction," April 2006

Honorable Mention, Virginia A. Gunderson Award for Best Graduate Essay in American Studies, Indiana University, 2004

Phi Beta Kappa, University of Michigan Chapter



## SERVICE

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Bloomington Faculty Council, Graduate Student Representative, January 2008-present

Budget Committee Member, "Open Secrets: Knowing and Unknowing" Conference, Indiana University, January 2008-present

Undergraduate Studies Committee, Indiana University English Department, September 2006-September 2007

Associate Instructor Board of Review Committee Member, September 2006-September 2007

American Studies/English Job Search Committee Member, October 2006-February 2007

Anti-Sweatshop Advisory Committee to the President, Graduate Employees Organization Representative, September 2005-September 2007

## REFERENCES

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### ***Purnima Bose***

Indiana University  
pbose@indiana.edu  
(812) 855-5334

Associate Professor of English  
Director of Cultural Studies  
Adjunct Professor of American Studies

### ***Margo Crawford***

Indiana University  
crawform@indiana.edu  
(812) 855-5283

Assistant Professor of English  
Adjunct Professor of American Studies

### ***Susan Gubar***

Indiana University  
gubar@indiana.edu  
(812) 855-3634

Distinguished Professor of English

### ***De Witt Kilgore***

Indiana University  
dkilgore@indiana.edu  
(812) 855-4148

Associate Professor of English  
Associate Professor of American Studies

### ***Robert Terrill***

Indiana University  
rterrill@indiana.edu  
(812) 855-0118

Associate Professor of Communication and Culture  
Adjunct Professor of American Studies

## **LANGUAGES**

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French: reading knowledge

Russian: reading knowledge

German: elementary reading knowledge

## **PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS**

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Modern Language Association

American Studies Association